

Exodus 30:17–21 and 38:8

Introduction

This morning, we come to the very last piece of furniture that's connected with the tabernacle. After the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place (the throne room), the table, the lamp, and the altar of incense in the Holy Place (the guest room), and the altar of burnt offering in the outer court, [See **Illustrations on page 8**] we come now to the bronze basin. We read in verses 17-19:

I. Exodus 30:17–19 — The LORD said to Moses, “You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet.”

This is the only piece of furniture that's not described in any detail. It appears that there are two separate pieces, the basin and the stand. The basin is obviously the circular bowl that holds the water. The stand may simply have been the pedestal that supported the bowl. [See **Illustration on page 9**] Or, the stand may have been a base that the bowl and pedestal stood on top of – perhaps something that would collect any water that spilled over from the basin. [See **Illustration on page 9**] It's easy enough to imagine the basic idea of what this basin and stand would have looked like.

One thing we know is that just like the altar of burnt offering, the basin was also to be made of bronze. Remember that in the tabernacle there are levels of sacred space, and these are marked by the decreasing value of the metals that are used – from gold, to silver, to bronze. Of course, even bronze was costly enough that it wouldn't have been used for common, everyday household furniture. We read in Exodus thirty-eight:

➤ Exodus 38:8 — He made the basin of bronze and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

This short little verse raises a whole lot of questions that we can guess at, but don't really have any sure answers to. But, I think the main point is for us to see that this bronze is of the very highest quality. Mirrors in ancient times were made from bronze or copper that was polished smooth until you could see your reflection. And, of course, to have the clearest reflection, a mirror would need the highest quality material. (cf. Stuart) So, it was the bronze from these mirrors that was collected, and then melted down and reshaped into the basin and its stand.

Maybe the altar didn't require this high-quality bronze because it was used for holding bloody sacrificial animals and the ashes from burnt offerings. If the bronze *altar* was usually dirty from blood and ashes, the bronze *basin* filled with water was all about purity, and cleansing, and *washing*. Also, the bronze basin is closer to the entrance of the tabernacle: “You shall put [the bronze basin] **between the tent of meeting and the altar**, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet.” [See **Illustration on page 10**]

In verse eighteen, we were told that this basin, with its stand, is for “**washing**.” Now, in verse nineteen, we're told more specifically that the water in this basin is for Aaron and his sons (the

priests) to “**wash** their **hands** and their **feet**.” This reminds us of a *different washing* of Aaron and his sons that takes place when they’re first consecrated to the priesthood.

- Exodus 29:4–5 — You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and wash them with water. Then you shall take the garments, and put on Aaron the coat and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breastpiece, and gird him with the skillfully woven band of the ephod.

So, this first washing was apparently very thorough because it takes place *before* the priests have been clothed in their priestly garments (maybe when they’re wearing only the linen undergarments). If the first washing covers basically the **whole** body, this new washing is only intended for the hands and the feet. So, what’s this washing for? What’s it about? We go on to read in verses 20-21:

II. Exodus 30:20–21 — When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall **wash** with water, so that they may not die. They shall **wash** their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations.

If the theme of the last passage was “counting,” the theme of this passage is clearly “**washing**.” Ever since we were all little, we’ve been taught to wash our hands before meals. We wash our hands before meals to kill germs and stay healthy, but that’s obviously not what this washing is about. If it was, it would be hard to understand why the penalty for failing to wash was death. Sometimes, I wonder if we can start to grow a little callous to these warnings of death. But if we truly stop to let them sink in, they should have a powerful, powerful effect on us. If the danger of *not washing* is death, then the “washing” itself must be a **really** big deal. Another sign of just how important this washing is can be seen in the fact that it’s to be “a statute **forever** to [the priests], even to [Aaron] and to his offspring **throughout their generations**.” This is a washing that’s to last “forever,” for as long as the Old Covenant continues. It should be pretty obvious to us that this isn’t just some empty, ceremonial ritual. Nothing that God commands ever is. This is a washing that means something, a washing that is to continue forever and ever, a washing that can end up meaning the difference between life and death.

So, now we’re ready to notice *when* the priests are to wash: “When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water.” [See **Illustration on page 10**] On the one hand, we know that the tent of meeting is Yahweh’s tent, where He Himself sits enthroned above the cherubim. But if the tent of meeting is especially connected with God’s presence, then so also is the bronze altar of burnt offering. Remember that an altar, in the Bible, is the ultimate point of contact between God and man. (cf. Exod. 20:24) So, what the tent and the altar both have in common is that they are both very uniquely and closely **connected** with the presence of the Lord. Therefore, before the priests go into the tent and before they come near the altar to minister—before they approach the presence of the Lord—they must wash with water – specifically, “they shall wash their hands and their feet.”

Once again, if the point was sanitation and cleanliness, we'd expect the priests to be required to wash *after they were finished* with the blood, and the animal carcasses, and the ashes at the altar. And, it's very likely that they *did*, but that's not God's requirement. God's requirement is that they wash *before* they approach the altar with all of its messy and bloody ritual. So, this much is clear, the purpose of this washing is in some way to make the priests **fit** to draw near to the Lord's presence.

Now we come to another big difference between the partial "hands and feet" washing and the "full body" washing of the priests at their consecration. If the "full body" washing was a one-time event, the "hands and feet" washing is one that's **repeated** over and over again – even multiple times every day. We could translate like this, "When[ever] they go into the tent of meeting, or when[ever] they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water." So, now we've covered *almost* everything – but *not quite* everything.

The purpose of the repeated washing of hands and feet was to make the priests fit, in some sense, to draw near to the Lord's presence. But the text also explains the purpose of this washing in another way – repeating it *twice*: "They shall wash with water, **so that they may not die**. They shall wash their hands and their feet, **so that they may not die**." It's so easy for us to hear these warnings of death and maybe struggle with thinking of God as a harsh and uncaring God, when, in fact, exactly the opposite is true. The point, here, is that God desires that His people should be *able* to come near to Him. That's the point. And, let's not forget that this is the *whole point* of the tabernacle. It's the whole point of the priesthood. The point, here, is that God does **NOT** wish for His people to die. And so, in His lavish mercy, He graciously **provides** for the priests the bronze basin full of water for washing. In His great love, He commands that this basin for washing should be placed **between** the entrance to the tent of meeting and the altar of burnt offering – the two places where God is especially present with His people. As an expression of His mercy and grace, here is yet another vivid symbol and reminder of the **care** which must be taken whenever the priests draw near to the Lord – the one who has already drawn near to them.

So what do these wonderful, beautiful verses in Exodus mean for us?

Conclusion

Ever since the beginning, human beings have been washing themselves. As a general rule, we don't like being dirty, and yet sooner or later, we do all get dirty – whether in a day, or as it accumulates over a few days, or a week. And so to remove the dirt, and the filth, and the grime, we wash ourselves with water. This washing of our bodies with water is pretty much universal to all human experience throughout all of history. So, it only makes sense that throughout the Bible, it's this washing with water that's used to picture the reality of spiritually being washed and cleansed from our sins. When you think about it, isn't this really a beautiful picture? So we read in Isaiah:

- Isaiah 1:16 (cf. Jer. 2:22; 4:14) — **Wash yourselves**; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil.

- Isaiah 4:3–4 — He who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have **washed away** the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst.

And then in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 5:25–26 — Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the **washing of water** with the word.

Of course, it's this analogy of washing with water that explains the symbolism of baptism. Ananias said to Paul after his vision on the road to Damascus:

- Acts 22:16 — And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.

And the writer of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 10:22 — Let us draw near... with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Sin clings to our souls like dirt clings to our bodies. Sin defiles our conscience like mud and grime pollute our bodies. And so, in the Bible, the solution to a defiled conscience is compared to the solution for a filthy body – we need to be washed, and purified, and made clean. We need to be washed so as to be made fit and presentable for the presence of the Lord.

And, brothers and sisters, *we have* been washed! *We have* been made clean! Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

- 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 (cf. 2 Pet. 1:9) — Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But **you were washed**, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

How were we washed? Paul speaks in Ephesians about the “washing of water **with the word**.” Jesus said to His disciples:

- John 15:3 — Already you are clean **because of the word** that I have spoken to you.

And so what we're meant to understand is that when we **received** the word of the Gospel and **believed** the word that Jesus spoke about who He is and what He came to do, it is **then** that we were washed, and purified, and cleansed from all our sin. What joyful news! The Apostle Peter says that God “made no distinction between [the Jews] and [the Gentiles], having cleansed their hearts by faith.” (Acts 15:9; cf. Rev. 7:14) What an awesome miracle this is!

And so, it's this "washing"—it's this purifying and cleansing through repentance and faith in the word of Christ that we have vouchsafed to us in the full-body "washing" of **baptism** – a washing that is once for all, and never needs to be repeated. It's this washing that's signified to us in our baptism that makes us fit and presentable for the presence of the Lord – both now, and also for all eternity in the age to come. Notice, again, what the writer of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 10:22 — Let us **draw near**... with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Remember that the priests embodied in themselves the whole covenant people, and that they were all ultimately called to be a "kingdom of priests." So, in the full-body, never-repeated washing of Aaron and his sons, we have represented God's heart for the washing of His whole people – something which has now been fulfilled in Christ, and the washing that we experience in baptism, through faith in His name.

Now, we've talked about how universal it is for us humans to want to be clean. In the Bible, there were two different kinds of washing. First, there was the washing of the whole body. This is what we have in Ruth chapter three, when Naomi says to Ruth:

- Ruth 3:3 (cf. 2 Sam. 11:2; 2 Kings 5:10-13) — Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor.

This is what we have today with showers and baths. But then there was also the far more common washing of just the feet or the hands. The feet we're especially important because of the sandals that people wore, and the dusty roads. So, when three travelers arrive at Abraham's tent in the heat of the day, Abraham urges them:

- Genesis 18:4 (cf. 24:32; 43:24; 1 Sam. 25:41; Judg. 19:21) — Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.

When David would send Uriah back to his house and his wife, he says:

- 2 Samuel 11:8 — Go down to your house and wash your feet.

Hospitality generally didn't require a full bath, and the reason for this is that it could usually be expected that when someone arrived at your house, they had already bathed (whether that day, or the day or two, or three before), and now all they needed was to have their feet and hands cleaned. (cf. Luke 7:44; 1 Tim. 5:10) Even today we wash our hands far more often than we take showers and baths, not just because of germs, but because our hands are the most likely to get dirty after working outside, working in the kitchen, working in the shop, etc. And so it's **both** these kinds of washing—the full-body "big event" and the constantly repeated hands and feet—that we have represented in the ceremonial washing of Aaron and his sons.

The full-body washing qualified Aaron and his sons to serve as priests to the Lord, and once washed in this way, they never needed to be washed again. So, what's the meaning of the constantly repeated washing of hands and feet whenever they went "into the tent of meeting," or

whenever they came “near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the Lord”? We know they weren’t constantly being re-consecrated; they weren’t constantly being disqualified and then re-qualified for the priesthood. They were simply being **maintained** and **preserved** and constantly **renewed** in their “fitness” to approach the presence of the Lord. (cf. Motyer, quoting Mackintosh) Even though their whole body had already been once for all washed and cleaned, they still needed the constantly repeated washing of their hands and their feet. As one commentator says, they still needed to be protected “from the impurities of the sinful nation in the midst of which they lived, [and from] their own nature, which was still affected with mortal corruption and sin.” (Keil) *This* is what helps us understand why, after the washing for their consecration, God graciously provides them with a bronze basin filled with water – water for washing *not* their whole body, but their hands and their feet.

Remember, the priests embodied in themselves the whole covenant people, all of whom were ultimately called to be a “kingdom of priests.” So, in this provision for the continuous washing of hands and feet, we have represented God’s **provision** for the continuous washing of *all* His people. That’s why the Psalmist can write:

- Psalm 26:6 (cf. 73:13; Deut. 21:6-7; Mat. 27:24) — I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O LORD.
- Psalm 24:3-4 — Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.

If the once-for-all full-body washing of the priests is fulfilled today in the washing that we receive in baptism, through faith in Christ’s name, where is the fulfillment, today, of the bronze basin filled with water for the continuous washing of our hands and our feet? I love how one commentator says it:

“The basin was set in the tabernacle, accessible and available for God’s people of old, and the same mercy opens fountains of cleansing for us. Confession of sin brings cleansing from sin... and the blood of Jesus, though shed once and for all on the cross, is the constantly available agency of cleansing for those who would walk in the light of God’s presence.” (Motyer)

Brothers and sisters, we have been washed once for all! Our whole body has been made clean. And yet there is still the constant reality that we sin and that this sin is a stain and a defilement that *does* cling to us and that *does* make us unfit for God’s presence until it is washed away. I think of the exchange between Peter and Jesus in John chapter thirteen:

- John 13:8-10 — Peter said to [Jesus], “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean.”

There's a warning *here*, no less than there's a warning in Exodus chapter thirty. To enter the presence of the Lord *at any time* without being washed (while stubbornly continuing in unconfessed sin) is a dangerous thing. * Paul even writes to the Corinthians:

- 1 Corinthians 11:29–30 — For anyone who eats and drinks [the bread and the cup] without discerning the body [and so, therefore, promoting strife and discord in the body] eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

There's a very real warning in the necessity for constant washing and cleansing, but there is also infinite mercy and grace in the abundant provision that God has already made for this continuous washing and cleansing through the blood of Jesus, His Son.

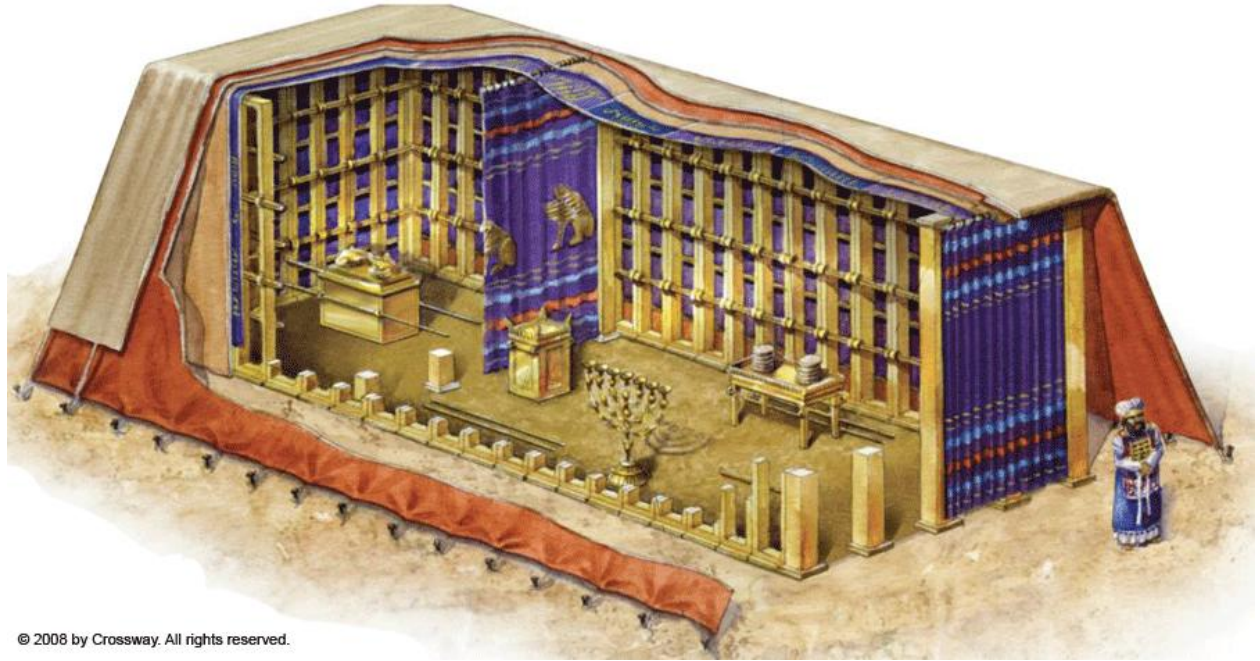
- 1 John 1:7–10 — If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Do we truly desire to be always washed and clean? Do we truly long to be *preserved* in fitness, each and every day, for approaching the presence of our Lord? Then may we never fail to delight in coming to the inexhaustible fountain that God has opened through His Son for our constantly renewed washing and cleansing. Would you describe yourself as a stranger to true confession, or as someone intimately acquainted with true confession? Let us confess our sins, and learn to pray **regularly** with the Psalmist:

- Psalm 51:2, 7 — **Wash** me thoroughly from my iniquity, and **cleanse** me from my sin! Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be **clean**; **wash** me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

* Performing the obligations of ministry in the Presence was not enough; preparation and fitness for the performance of those obligations were equally important. (Durham)

“Even though the New Testament commands self-examination only as preparation for the Lord’s Table, dare we enter that holy presence at any time without thoughtful confession and without taking up the word of God to allow its sanctifying truth to shower upon us, permeate our beings and to bring us all over again into obedience and sanctification?” (Motyer)



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