



## TABERNACLE FURNITURE

Exodus 30-31

Everything from the place of worship to the specifics of how to worship is spelled out in detail in the Old Testament. That worship system is not for the church, but the bedrock principles found in it provide a useful measure of our worship practices and attitudes today.

In Exodus chapters 30 and 31 the focus is on the forty days Moses spent with the Lord there on Mount Sinai. We're going to learn more details about the tabernacle and its construction. But more than that, we're going to uncover several timeless principles for life and worship.

The first principle is that *prayer must be a priority in life*. Here in chapter 30 the Lord describes in detail how Moses is to build the incense altar for the tabernacle. This altar is to be placed inside the tabernacle building, in that section called the Holy Place, where the priests minister daily. In verse 6 the Lord says to Moses:

*"You shall put it 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."*

In other words, the altar is placed near the ark of the covenant. In fact, the only thing separating the ark and this altar of incense is the veil. And you may remember that inside the Holy of Holies on top of that ark is the mercy seat, where God's presence is manifested.

On the hot coals of this ornate altar, the high priest is to sprinkle fresh incense before the Lord twice a day. The incense rises as a sweet-smelling offering to the Lord.

Throughout Scripture incense is a symbol of prayer. Revelation 5:8 takes us before the throne of God in heaven, where there are "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."<sup>1</sup> The Israelites saw this altar of incense as symbolizing their prayers continually ascending to God.

This perpetual offering of prayer is an illustration of 1 Thessalonians 5:17, where the believer is told to "pray without ceasing." In other words, all through the day, we should offer praise, thanksgiving, personal requests, and intercession for others.



Hittite relief from Boghazkoy with altar before bull image



Listen, the best way to get someone back on his or her feet might be for you to get down on your knees. That's what this altar of incense is doing—it's keeping the nation of Israel on its feet, by effectively representing the nation perpetually on its knees before God.

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In verse 13 the Lord refers to taking a census. "Each one who is numbered" is literally, "each one who crosses over." This is military terminology, referring to all those who voluntarily allow themselves to be counted for military duty.

And in verse 11, The Lord tells Moses that each one counted "shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD." Then in verses 14-15 we read, "Everyone who is numbered in the census, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the Lord's offering . . . to make atonement for your lives."

This "ransom/offering" was a symbolic act that basically recognized their lives were accountable to God. And imagine every twenty-year-old beginning to recognize the gravity of this truth—that their lives belonged to God.

Then in verse 18 the Lord instructs Moses to build a basin of bronze, which is to be filled with water. It's placed out in the courtyard for the priests to wash their hands and feet throughout the day. It represents more than clean hands and feet by the way; it symbolizes a pure heart.

In fact, verse 20 says, "They shall [must] wash with water, so that they may not die." So, imagine the

people of Israel, day after day, watching their priests going continually to that washbasin, representing the need for cleansing throughout the day.

You don't worship God with an unclean heart. The timeless principle illustrated here is that *if you want to live in fellowship with God, you're going to need to cleanse your heart throughout the day.* This means confessing your sins and asking God's forgiveness whenever you fall short. My friend, that isn't once a day; that's throughout the day. In fact, the mark of a maturing believer isn't necessarily sinning less but confessing quicker. How long does it take you when you have a sinful thought before you confess it to the Lord?

Now this last portion of Exodus chapter 30 gives us the recipe for making the anointing oil used to consecrate the priests and the tabernacle and its furnishings. We're also given here the recipe for the incense burned on the altar of incense.

Why be so specific? Is it because there's something mystical about these spices? Not at all. The Lord is teaching a timeless truth for us all here; namely, that *God is the one who determines what is acceptable to Him.* We don't come to Him on our terms but on His. We don't set the agenda; He does. We don't decide what's right and then demand God bless our decision. We submit to God's revealed Word, and we live our lives according to His design—even when we don't fully understand.

Chapter 31 begins with a note about the men God chose to head up the construction project on the tabernacle. The Lord declares in verses 2-3:

*"I have called by name Bezalel . . . of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship."*

Then down in verse 6 the Lord adds:



*“And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab . . . I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you.”*

In other words, the Lord has gifted these individuals and all who work with them in crafting this tabernacle, all its furnishings, the embroidered curtains, the gold work, the woodwork, the garments, the anointing oil, and the incense.

So, here’s another timeless principle: *God’s work is to be done in God’s power according to God’s designs in order to experience God’s good pleasure.*

Yes, we use the resources and gifts and gifted people God has given us, but we depend upon His power. We don’t bank everything on our skill or knowledge or experience. Jesus repeated this principle to every disciple in the New Testament when He said, “Apart from me you can do—something?” No, He said, “Apart from me you can do *nothing*” (John 15:5).

Well, Exodus 31 wraps up with a warning to Israel to keep their Sabbath rest. In verse 13 the Lord says:

*“Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.”*

The Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant, so it had unique significance to Israel. But as we’ve already learned with other signs, this sign pointed to

something of permanent substance that would arrive in the person of the Messiah.

And what did Jesus say? “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). This is spiritual, permanent, rest. This comes not through the Sabbath, not through a sacrifice given to a priest, not in the cleansing from a laver in the courtyard, and not in a tabernacle made of wood—these were all just signs that pointed us to our Savior. He is our Sabbath rest; He is the sacrificial altar; He is the mercy seat; He is the cleansing basin of water; He is the candlelight of truth.

You don’t have to go to a priest today—you can confess your sins immediately and directly to God. You don’t have to wait until Saturday to worship—you can worship Him every day. You don’t have to visit a tabernacle where the Spirit of God resides—you, beloved, are the temple of the Holy Spirit today (1 Corinthians 6:19).

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Do you look at your daily work as service to the Lord? Read Colossians 3:23-24 and then consider how does, or would, this truth affect your attitude towards serving? And towards those you serve with?

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<sup>1</sup> See also Psalm 141:2; Luke 1:8-10; and Revelation 8:3-4.



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