

Sermon 103, Getting Clean for God, Exodus 30:17-21

Proposition: The final piece of furniture in the tabernacle complex teaches us that God rules the sea, echoes some of our society's purity codes, and also shows us that a true priest must be washed with pure water.

- I. What the Laver Was, vv. 17-21
 - A. A Tame Sea
 - B. A Source of Water
 - C. A Piece of Furniture that Needs No Cleansing
 1. Cf. The Bronze Altar Cleansed with Blood, 29:36
 2. The Golden Altar, Place of Atonement with Blood, 30:10
- II. What the Laver Did, vv. 20-21
 - A. It Cleansed Priests with Water, 29:4
 - B. It Saved Priests' Lives: Failure to Cleanse Brought Death, v. 21

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to look at yet another piece of furniture found in the tabernacle. This piece was not found in the tabernacle proper, but rather in the courtyard outside the tabernacle. It stood between the altar of burnt offering and the tabernacle door. This piece of furniture was a large tub or tank for holding water; its name is typically translated "basin" or "laver," though the NLT has the inimitable "washbasin." What did this piece of furniture do, and what did it mean? We will see that it shows God's rule over the sea, that it echoes some of our own society's purity codes, and that it shows that a true priest must be washed with pure water.

I. What the Laver Was, vv. 17-21

As always with our analysis of the tabernacle's furniture, we want to look primarily at the obvious. Are there deeper meanings? I believe that there are. But what they are is a little hard to tell. The obvious, though, is obvious. There are three obvious points to make about this large basin of water.

A. A Tame Sea

The first is that it is a tame sea. In the new heavens John sees that there is no more sea. Why? Because the sea represents the chaos waters. We have already seen it in this very book of Exodus, as Israel descends into the Red Sea at night and thus symbolically into the underworld, down into the darkness. Furthermore, Israel climbs back out on the far shore just as the sun is rising, once again a symbolic resurrection with the dawn of morning light.

The floods have lifted up, O LORD, The floods have lifted up their voice; The floods lift up their pounding waves. More than the sounds of many waters, Than the mighty breakers of the sea, The LORD on high is mighty. Thy testimonies are fully confirmed; Holiness befits Thy house, O LORD, forevermore. (Psa 93:3-5 NAS)

The chaotic pounding of the sea is directly compared to the rule of God — and God’s rule is said to be superior. He is mightier than the waves of the sea. The psalm also moves from God’s rule over the pounding waves to the holiness of God’s house. In other words, in this psalm and in many other places there is an association between the sea and the dwelling place of God. Look at Psalm 46, for instance.

God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; Though its waters roar and foam, Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, The holy dwelling places of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. (Psa 46:1-5 NAS)

The sea shakes the mountains, but it cannot shake the dwelling place of the Almighty. Instead of a sea, His city is founded on a river. That in itself is a fascinating claim, because if you know your geography you know that there is no river in Jerusalem. The city has only a small stream, the brook/wadi Kidron. What is the association between the mighty, pounding sea and the dwelling place of God? Just this: God rules the waves of the sea. Psalm 89:9 says it in so many words: “Thou dost rule the swelling of the sea; When its waves rise, Thou dost still them.” Lest we miss it, Jesus rebuked the wind and waves, saying “Peace, be still” — and immediately all was calm.

The laver, then, stands as a symbol of the tamed sea, of the power of God over the ultimate source of chaos and destruction. The gods of the ANE had to battle the sea monsters and chaos waters. But Yahweh is so firmly in control that He can keep the sea in the courtyard of His home. It is no threat to Him. Now, the laver in the tabernacle courtyard is admittedly not called a “sea” like the one in Solomon’s temple was. But one thing that it obviously symbolizes is the dominance of Yahweh over the sea.

B. A Source of Water

The second function of the laver is to provide water. Just as the lampstand is for light and the table for eating, so the laver is to hold water for the ongoing needs of a tent without indoor plumbing. Presumably the laver was elevated on a stand with taps underneath so that water could be drawn out of it for all the tabernacle’s washing needs. In His house, God values cleanliness. He does not want His servants to be filthy and dirty in His sight. The water was also stationed between the altar of burnt offering and the tabernacle door. The altar symbolized the truth that there is no access to God’s presence without the shedding of blood. But the laver symbolized the truth that there is no access to God’s presence without being cleansed.

C. A Piece of Furniture that Needs No Cleansing

We also note from the text that, unlike the bronze altar, this other piece of courtyard furniture needs no cleansing.

1. Cf. The Bronze Altar Cleansed with Blood, 29:36

The bronze altar had to be purified and anointed before it could be useful, because it symbolized in part the sacrifice of Christ who was anointed.

2. The Golden Altar, Place of Atonement with Blood, 30:10

The golden altar similarly had to be cleansed with blood before it could be useful for its intended purpose of offering the prayers of the saints.

But the laver did not have to be cleansed. It had to be anointed and consecrated (see 30:27-28). It was not properly part of the priestly ministry. It was an adjunct, something that held the water that was needed for the performance of the ceremonies. It cleansed, not in a spiritual sense but in a physical sense.

II. What the Laver Did, vv. 20-21

That takes us from what it was to what it did.

A. It Cleansed Priests with Water, 29:4

It cleansed priests with water. The text does not say that once the priest had bathed and washed his hands he was morally pure. But the cleanliness imparted by the laver was indeed next to godliness because it was something God demanded. Just as the priests had to be physically clothed they had to be physically washed. In other words, the “spiritual meaning” of this text is the physical meaning. God wants His priests to be physically clean, not gross and stinky. The old American tradition of taking one’s weekly bath on Saturday night stems from this basic idea. You should show up for worship cleansed in a physical sense. That doesn’t make you holy, but it does please the Lord.

He wanted the priests’ hands and feet washed when they entered the tent, to come into His presence at all, and also when they approached the altar to offer sacrifice.

B. It Saved Priests’ Lives: Failure to Cleanse Brought Death, v. 21

And in fact, this cleansing of the hands and feet pleased the LORD; those who neglected or omitted it were struck dead.

So one direct application of the truth of the laver is to clean up for worship. Make sure you have washed your hands, and your feet and whole body if at all possible. Another direct application is that the Lord wants present in His house, among His people, whatever is needed to allow us to worship. It is not wrong to have an empty tank here at the front of the church, or to have musical instruments, light fixtures, chairs, ovens, coffee makers, and the other paraphernalia of our worship present where we gather.

The reality that God would strike those who omitted to wash also points to this truth: God cares about the smallest details of our worship. While He no longer requires His worshippers to be washed on pain of death, He still regulates worship and demands that only what He has approved be part of our worship. We cannot add to the elements of worship, and when it comes to the circumstances of worship, we must beware that we are scrupulously making use only of those things that are profitable to the elements.

Finally, a fourth application is to look to your baptism. Your bodies have been washed once-for-all with pure water. If not, you are not yet fit to come into God’s presence. The daily washing in the tabernacle ritual has been replaced by an end-time washing that cleanses us from sin and fits us for our Father’s presence. Praise God, then, and don’t neglect to give your children this washing. Amen.

