

THE KINGDOM, THE BIBLE, & US

Understanding the Bible's story, Jesus' importance, & Our place in God's Kingdom plan



Lesson 51- God Dwells Among His People: The Table & The Lampstand
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Introduction

We began talking about the Tabernacle in Exodus 25 in our last lesson. God desires to have a physical object, the Tabernacle, where His special presence can dwell. This is so He can show Israel that His presence is truly among them. We explored the first piece of furniture mentioned to go in God's house which was the Ark of the Covenant. From mercy seat that covers the Ark, God would speak to Moses and the priests. God's special presence resided in this holy of holies room, which was to be the inner most room of the Tabernacle.

We continue looking at more pieces of furniture and what they were intended to teach the Jews back then and us today.

A Word of Caution for Interpreting Symbolism in the Bible

We often find concepts or objects in the Bible that may have a deeper symbolic meaning to them. Before we look at the rest of the furniture in the Tabernacle, I want to stress that caution must be exercised when we attempt to interpret what these objects might mean symbolically. Let me share some guiding principles for interpreting potential symbolism in the Bible.

First Principle: Don't Read Symbols *into* the Bible, read them *out of* the Bible

I once heard these wise words, "Do not read *into* the Bible what you cannot read *out of* the Bible." This means we should not claim that something in the Bible has a particular symbolic meaning unless we can prove this with the Scriptures. If we cannot find proof for the symbolism in the words of the Bible, then we should not impose our opinion of what an object meant symbolically back into the Bible.

Second Principle: Does the Other Testament Help?

There are times we are not told directly in the Bible what an object's symbolic meaning is. When this happens, we must look to the rest of the Scriptures to find clues or principles that can help us arrive at a reasonable conclusion about an object's symbolism. I call this, look to the *Other Testament* for help. This means can we find support from the New Testament to help us interpret something in the Old Testament? Can we find support in the Old Testament to help us interpret something in the New Testament?

For example, when we looked at the manna God provided to Israel in the wilderness, we went to the New Testament and saw Jesus taught that He was symbolically the bread of life that came down from heaven just like God gave manna to Israel. Another

example is the book of Hebrews is full of symbolic interpretations of the Old Testament concepts.

Third Principle: Let Biblical Principles & Theology be your Guide

If we do not have clear evidence from the scriptures that there is deeper symbolism going on (principle 1) and we do not have clear evidence from the Other Testament (principle 2); then, we can humbly make some *suggestions* about what an object *might* mean. What we must do is let the Bible's theology and principles guide our suggestions as to what a concept or an object's symbolism *could* mean.

For example, I kept my interpretations of the statues of the cherubim limited to what Exodus 25 said and what I could find from the rest of the Bible where they are mentioned. I limited my interpretation of what the cherubim may have represented to what the Bible specifically said about them (not much) and then I let theology and principles guide some *possible* conclusions about them. You may recall that I said it is *possible* they function as a type of guardian to God's glorious presence. The Bible does not directly say this, but I think it is a *reasonable* conclusion given the principles taught in the Bible about them.

If I were to claim they must be symbolic for at least ten other ideas, this would be wrong on my part because I have no real proof. I encourage us to err on the side of caution when we talk about the furniture in the Tabernacle and think about the symbolism to them.

The Table of the Bread of Presence

Exodus 25:23-30

God commands a table made from acacia wood be built with measurements of 2 cubits long by 1 cubit in width by 1.5 cubits in height (3ft Length X 1.5ft Width X 2.25ft Height¹). It will be overlayed with pure gold. Like the Ark of the Covenant, this table will also have four gold rings for two poles to go through each side to carry the table.

It is to hold dishes, pans, and jars on it. As well as bowls for pouring drink offerings. These 'dishes' are to be made from pure gold. Verse thirty says there is to be bread placed on this table continuously. The NASB calls it *the bread of Presence*. The NKJV and KJV versions call it *showbread* (*shewbread* in KJV).

The Hebrew word behind *Presence* or *showbread* is the literal word for face. It is often used to describe facing towards someone else. Another usage is describing being *in*

¹ Assuming one cubit is approximately 18 inches.

the presence of someone else. This seems to be happening in Exodus 25:30. This bread is special because God calls it bread that is to be used *in front of God's face*, or in the presence of God to say it another way. This is why some English Bibles call this the bread of *Presence*.

Given what we have said so far, what do you think this table and the bread on it might symbolize?

Picture the scene of this Tabernacle as being much like a home. God wants to dwell among Israel, His people. He is a spirit and is already present with them, but He wants a physical location that serves as His 'house.' The Tabernacle is to be a physical representation of God's presence among Israel. Homes have rooms and furniture in them. This is how the Tabernacle is to be set up too.

God has two rooms inside the Tabernacle, the inner and outer. The inner is the holy of holies and the outer room is the holy place. Inside the inner most room of the 'home,' is where the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat are. This is the spot where God will commune with Moses and the priests from that time on. The outer room will have furniture in it, much like a home. God is not like a person walking around inside His home, but it is meant to show Israel that His presence is very much with them. God wants furniture in the Tabernacle to represent fellowship and communion like when someone invites you into their home to have a meal.

The Table of the Bread of Presence seems to be a piece of furniture set up for eating meals on. God commanded for dishes, pots and pans made of gold to be set on it. Then, there is to be bread continually on it in His presence. This symbolizes the people having a meal and communing with their God in His home. Also, it could symbolize Israel dedicating some of their food (such as bread) and continuously offering to God as a type of fellowship meal.

We get a few more details about this Table's usage and the Bread from other passages. Exodus 25:29 & 37:16 said it was to hold pitchers on it for the drink offerings.

Leviticus 24:5-9 gives further details about the bread. It was to be arranged in two rows with six to a row and placed on the table.

What do you think these two rows of six represent?

The twelve loaves of bread represent the twelve tribes of Israel. This scene pictures God relating to Israel that they are always before Him in *His Presence*. God instructed that every sabbath day there shall be new bread set out on the table. Aaron and his sons (the priests) are permitted to eat the old bread from the previous week, in the holy place.

Bread is one of the most basic foods for human sustenance. Jesus said in the Lord's Prayer, "give us this day our daily *bread*." We know Jesus meant more than literal bread. This was symbolic of praying that God meet our needs each day. The Hebrews of Moses' day would have felt the same about bread. It is a basic staple of human food to provide one's needs. I think we can safely assume that God intended for the table with the bread on it to remind Israel that He was in their midst, they are before Him and in His presence, God wants to fellowship and commune in friendship of sorts with His people, and God would provide for His people's needs every day.

Jesus as the True Bread

In John 6:35 Jesus said He was the true bread that came down from heaven to give eternal life. In context Jesus was referring to the manna God gave in the wilderness to Israel. I want to point out though that God called for bread to be placed on the Table of Presence and this parallels another concept about Jesus. God used bread on the table in the Tabernacle to show He was having a meal of fellowship with His people and providing for their needs (daily bread). In the same way Jesus said about Himself that only through Him can a person come to God, be saved from their sins, and have eternal life. Jesus is the real bread people need to have their needs provided for by God and be able to commune with Him in fellowship.

The Golden Lampstand

Exodus 25:31-40

The next piece of furniture God commands used in the Tabernacle is the golden lampstand. It is to be made from pure gold. It will have six branches coming out from the sides, three on each side. Every house needs light and God's Tabernacle is no different. God's Tabernacle will have light with this golden special lampstand.

Jews still use this lampstand concept; it is called the *menorah*. It is the lampstand you often see that symbolizes Judaism. To be fair about the passage from Exodus, we do not get specific dimensions. Bible scholars tend to agree that this lampstand was *not* a table lampstand. This was most likely a tall, heavy lampstand meant to be placed on the ground.

We know this lampstand was large and heavy because in Exodus 25:39 God says it is to be made of one talent of pure gold. A talent is approximately seventy-five pounds. Sometimes we see artistic drawings of this lampstand and it is depicted as small golden lampstand sitting on a table. This was probably not the case. God intended for it to light up the holy place room in the Tabernacle and be sturdy enough to survive travel with Israel through the wilderness. Some scholars estimate it was most likely five feet tall.

The design of this lampstand resembles a golden tree. The cups to hold the lamps were designed like almond blossoms with flowers and buds in the design. The description of the lampstand gives the impression God wanted it to look like a tree with a trunk (the base) and tree branches coming out (three lampstand branches on each side) with flowers budding on the branches (the lamp cupholders designed like almond blossoms).

There is some confusion over the exact look of this lampstand given God's description of how many bulb cups there were to be in verses 33-35. If we count the total number of bulb cups called for it would be twenty-two. Yet God says there is to be only seven lamps for light in verse 37. Most likely God only wanted seven lamps for light while the other fifteen bulb cups were used to decorate the rest of the lampstand like a tree blooming. These fifteen would not hold lamps for light. This must have been a very beautifully designed lampstand.

We know God does not need light to see, so this lampstand's light was not for God's benefit, it was for Israel's. God wanted the lamps angled so they shine light in front of the lampstand. It was placed opposite the Table of the Bread of Presence, so the lampstand was meant to light up the holy place room with its light focused on the Table of the Bread.

If the lampstand was not for God's benefit, what do you think it was used for?

The priests were the only ones who could enter the holy place room. They had duties to perform there and needed light to see. This lampstand would at a practical level give light for the priests to perform their duties.

What might this lampstand symbolize that God wanted to teach Israel? Scholars and commentators debate that the lampstand represented the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden or the Tree of Light, Jesus. There are more views, but I think you get the idea. We must use caution, but I think it is helpful to think through this and ask ourselves what was God attempting to teach Israel with the lampstand?

We know it was meant to give light. The priests needed light to do their job in the Holy Place room. We also know it was designed to represent a beautiful tree. We have a tree designed to give light so the priests can do their work. If we factor in that the Tabernacle was meant to be a symbol of God's home, God's presence among Israel, I think we can safely say a few conclusions.

A home at night with its lights on in the living room lets passerby people see someone is home. I think this is one idea God wanted to show Israel. This lampstand was to be giving off light all day and night. At a night an Israelite could open the door of their tent, look towards the Tabernacle, and see some glow of light coming from it. This image would teach them that their God was always 'up' and always home. Why does that matter? Once again this is God's way of reminding Israel His presence is always with them. God truly lives among His people.

When I was a kid, Motel 6 hotels used to have commercials with the slogan, "We'll leave the light on for you." This reminds me of what God showed Israel with this lampstand. In a sense God was saying, "I'm leaving the light on in the holy place day and night, I'm always home, I'm always here for you, you are always welcome to commune with Me."

Also, we know that God is a God of light, not darkness. God lives in the light and not the dark. 1 John 1:5 says, "This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." God could have used this lampstand to remind Israel that He is not a God of the shadows, but a God of light. There is not darkness or sin with God, only truth and light.

Some Bible commentators point out the lampstand was meant to look like a tree with flower buds blooming on it and this implies the giving of life. Since trees bud and produce fruit for people to eat, then the tree of the lampstand may imply the idea that God gives life to His people. This is possible but I did not elaborate on this view simply because we cannot be entirely sure of this. Again, this is a possible symbol of the lampstand and an interesting idea to think about.

Jesus the True Light

Another concept is to think about the perspective of being a Jew back then walking towards the Tabernacle to give your offering. As you get closer to the Tabernacle, the glowing light from this lampstand would become brighter and clearer. I think it is fair to say this image taught the Jews that as they approach God in the Tabernacle, they are approaching true light by which they are saved and brought into fellowship with God. God is the source of the light they need to be saved and live by.

How might the idea of the light from the lampstand tie in to Jesus?

This ties to John's teaching that Jesus Christ as the true Light from God.

In Him [Jesus the Word] was life, and the life was **the Light of men**. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light. There was the **true Light** which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. (John 1:4-9)

Also in John 8:12, "Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."

God did not want people left to live in the darkness of their sin, so He sent Jesus to shine the true light from God and provide eternal life to those who believe in Him for the forgiveness of their sins.

It seems that God used the lampstand back in the Old Covenant era to show His people that they depend on Him to provide the true light they need to know how to have a relationship with God, fellowship with God, and worship God. God also shined this light even at night, so His people knew His presence was always with them.

This fits perfectly with what Jesus said He came to do. He is the true light of God come to earth. Only through Jesus can we have forgiveness, fellowship, and life with God.

Conclusion

I love talking about the Old Testament Tabernacle because it teaches us God wants to live among His people. God is not distant, He is near. Our sin causes us to be incapable of entering God's presence. God makes a way for us to have our sins atoned for so that we can enter His holy presence. God provides a way for His people Israel to see His presence is with them at the Tabernacle and have a way to worship Him and know their sins are forgiven.

Homes have furniture in them, so does God's house. We have seen so far, the Ark of the Covenant. God's special presence would commune with Moses and the priests from it. We have now seen the Table of the Bread of Presence and the Lampstand. God wants His people to fellowship with Him. God wants His people to know He provides for their needs. God also wants His people to see His light is on all the time shining the true way to His presence.

In a much greater way, God provides us a path to His presence and forgiveness through Jesus Christ, the bread and light of God.