

EXODUS—WEEK 21

UNIQUE DISTINCTIONS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Moses' Descent from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments by Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680) on display at the Royal Palace, Amsterdam

God finishes specifying the plans for the Tabernacle, including the courtyard. He then adds a curious detail—that the lamp should stay lit 24/7, even on the Sabbath. This raises some interesting issues.

Lastly, He details the clothing for the priests, highlighting their role as holy representatives of the people. Both their clothing and their work, even on the Sabbath, are unique distinctions.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.

Exodus 27:9–28:30 — Unique Distinctions
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1 Exodus 27:9–19 (ESV)

“You shall make the court of the tabernacle. On the south side the court shall have hangings of fine twined linen a hundred cubits long for one side. Its twenty pillars and their twenty bases shall be of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver. And likewise for its length on the north side there shall be hangings a hundred cubits long, its pillars twenty and their bases twenty, of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver. And for the breadth of the court on the west side there shall be hangings for fifty cubits, with ten pillars and ten bases. The breadth of the court on the front to the east shall be fifty cubits. The hangings for the one side of the gate shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. On the other side the hangings shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. For the gate of the court there shall be a screen twenty cubits long, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework. It shall have four pillars and with them four bases. All the pillars around the court shall be filleted with silver. Their hooks shall be of silver, and their bases of bronze. The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty, and the height five cubits, with hangings of fine twined linen and bases of bronze. All the utensils of the tabernacle for every use, and all its pegs and all the pegs of the court, shall be of bronze.”

A fillet is a band around the pillar to attach the hook to the pillar.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fillet>

The court of the tabernacle is too large to have cross-pieces. Fortunately, there’s no fabric stretching across to pull the pillars inward—but there’s still wind. How do they keep the pillars from blowing over?

Exodus 35:18 mentions, *“pegs of the court, and their cords.”* So, it seems that the pillars were steadied by guy-wires.

Most importantly, at 7’6” (5 cubits) high, the courtyard walls blocked people from seeing anything other than the roof of the tabernacle. The goings on inside aren’t for show.

This sets a standard that will continue forever.

Phony religions are all show. The truth is not.

“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” — Matthew 6:5-6 (ESV)

Pray for your pastors. Much of what they do is in secret—so they get little praise (in this world) for their efforts. Lift them up to the LORD for a special blessing.

Specifically, ask God to encourage them by letting them see something of the difference they are making in someone’s life. Pastors endure a lot of discouraging things. The occasional glimpse of why it’s all worthwhile is the fuel that keeps them going.

Consider how you can give them a shot of that fuel.

2 Exodus 27:20–21 (ESV)

“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 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.”

Every indication (here and in Leviticus 24:1–4) is that the lamp is to burn all night every night—including on the Sabbath. This is clearer in The Amplified Bible and in The Complete Jewish Bible. Both may be researched here:

<http://www.biblegateway.com/>

Obviously, *Aaron and his sons* will have to work hard to *tend it from evening to morning before the LORD*. Keeping seven oil lamps burning may not seem like hard work, but pulling an all-nighter to do it definitely qualifies.

So, this new statute provides a special case exception to the law against working on the Sabbath. That’s not a problem, since God is the lord of the Sabbath.

This is important background for when Jesus claims to be the lord of the Sabbath.

“For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” — Matthew 12:8 (ESV)

And he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” — Luke 6:5 (ESV)

The Pharisees who were questioning Jesus in these passages were well aware of Exodus 27:20-21 and its implications. Jesus’s reply shocks them. He made an airtight logical argument against their objection, but that argument is based on a claim that He’s God Himself.

Before, they had a relatively minor complaint about His doing work on the Sabbath. Now they’re confronted with a claim that is either blasphemy or the most wonderful news they’ve ever heard.

If keeping the seven lamps burning is an exception to keeping the Sabbath, are there others? Yes.

And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him. He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” — Matthew 12:10–12 (ESV)

Jesus’s point is, “Don’t be silly.” While keeping the Sabbath is very important—and many of us need to give this more attention—it can still be taken to extremes. An argument can even be made that you shouldn’t dial 911 on the Sabbath. Clearly, that’s nuts—and would be anything but honoring to God.

How should you keep the Sabbath? What’s not allowed?

3 Exodus 28:1–5 (ESV)

“Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood. These are the garments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a coat of checker work, a turban, and a sash. They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests. They shall receive gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen.”

These are uniforms!

They seem to be the earliest uniforms in human history. They predate by over a thousand years the terracotta army that was buried with the first emperor of China. The terracotta soldiers weren't dressed exactly the same anyway. There is no evidence of any other uniforms near the time of the Exodus.

These uniforms have one purpose—holiness. *They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests.* These uniforms are not designed to be warm, or comfortable, or waterproof. They might be all of those things too, but that's just a coincidence.

These uniforms are to separate the priests who serve in the tabernacle from everyone else. In a sense, these uniforms provide an extra layer of security. God doesn't want just anyone wandering in to the tabernacle. These uniforms make it obvious who belongs and who doesn't. That's why they are made of the same material as the tabernacle.

We keep coming back to the same basic theme—God determines how He will be worshipped. That's for His purposes, not ours. If He wants us to worship Him by standing on our heads, He'd say so.

Fortunately, He doesn't specify anything that impractical. Still, worship isn't designed for practicality.

Many holy things are impractical. Turning the other cheek is impractical. Grace is impractical. Loving your enemies is impractical. Jesus dying for our sins is impractical.

If God's highest priority was being practical, we'd be in a whole lot of trouble.

Kingdom priorities aren't always practical, but the other extreme can be worse. We're not called to be stupid. How can we know when God wants us to be impractical?

Ask! If God wants you to do something unusual, He won't just drop subtle hints. Ask the LORD to clearly show you His will for you.

If His reply scares you or confuses you, it's okay to ask for a confirming sign. Gideon did.

4 Exodus 28:6–14 (ESV)

“And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and of fine twined linen, skillfully worked. It shall have two shoulder pieces attached to its two edges, so that it may be joined together. And the skillfully woven band on it shall be made like it and be of one piece with it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen. You shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. As a jeweler engraves signets, so shall you engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel. You shall enclose them in settings of gold filigree. And you shall set the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel. And Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance. You shall make settings of gold filigree, and two chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; and you shall attach the corded chains to the settings.”

An ephod is like an apron.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ephod>

It's the golden apron here:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PLATE4DX.jpg>

The ephod is impressive enough, as befits this holy uniform, but the onyx stones are the key. When a priest enters the tabernacle, he's not doing this for himself; he's entering on behalf of the whole nation of Israel. This is symbolized by the names of the twelve tribes inscribed on the onyx stones.

One of the key concepts of Christianity is the priesthood of all believers. We effectively enter the tabernacle when we pray. That's why it's important for us to pray for others.

Of all the people you should pray for, your teachers probably need it most. Every teacher should be intimidated by the prospect of impacting the faith of others. I know I am.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. — James 3:1 (ESV)

Pray especially for the teachers and youth leaders in your church. Their importance cannot be overstated. Ask them what their prayer requests are. I'll bet they give you more details than you expected.

You can pray for me too (and all the other writers at Ailbe). I get stuck a lot trying to figure out what a passage is teaching. The amazing thing is, the more stuck I get at first, the better the devotional ends up.

Thank God I get unstuck.

5 Exodus 28:15–30 (NIV)

“Fashion a breastpiece for making decisions—the work of skilled hands. Make it like the ephod: of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely twisted linen. It is to be square—a span long and a span wide—and folded double. Then mount four rows of precious stones on it. The first row shall be carnelian, chrysolite and beryl; the second row shall be turquoise, lapis lazuli and emerald; the third row shall be jacinth, agate and amethyst; the fourth row shall be topaz, onyx and jasper. Mount them in gold filigree settings. There are to be twelve stones, one for each of the names of the sons of Israel, each engraved like a seal with the name of one of the twelve tribes. “For the breastpiece make braided chains of pure gold, like a rope. Make two gold rings for it and fasten them to two corners of the breastpiece. Fasten the two gold chains to the rings at the corners of the breastpiece, and the other ends of the chains to the two settings, attaching them to the shoulder pieces of the ephod at the front. Make two gold rings and attach them to the other two corners of the breastpiece on the inside edge next to the ephod. Make two more gold rings and attach them to the bottom of the shoulder pieces on the front of the ephod, close to the seam just above the waistband of the ephod. The rings of the breastpiece are to be tied to the rings of the ephod with blue cord, connecting it to the waistband, so that the breastpiece will not swing out from the ephod. Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart on the breastpiece of decision as a continuing memorial before the LORD. Also put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron’s heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD.”

The NIV is better here; the exact word translations don’t show the purpose of the breastpiece. They just call it the “*breastpiece of judgment*.” That’s not wrong, but what judgment?

The precious stones make the breastpiece ornate. Is its purpose to get God to suspend judgment, allowing the priest to enter the tabernacle? Could be, especially if you call it the breastpiece of judgment.

But that’s not it. The breastpiece is for **making** judgements. We’re not told exactly how, but we know this was done. Other references describe using the Urim and the Thummim to discern the LORD’s will.

He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD. — Numbers 27:21a (NIV)

The governor ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there was a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim. — Ezra 2:63 (NIV)

Always pray for those tasked with making wise judgments. Our leaders have been placed there by God.

The authorities that exist have been established by God. — Romans 13:1b (NIV)

Discipline yourself to pray sincerely for the politicians you disagree with. Ask God to give them wisdom.

If this is difficult, it’s because of our sin not theirs. Pray about that too.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What does your pastor need prayer for?
2. What should be strictly avoided on the Sabbath?
3. Have you ever felt called to something impractical or extreme?
4. Who is the most significant teacher in your life right now?
5. Do you pray for politicians you disagree with? If not, how can you change that?