

The True Light

Numbers 8:1–4

Our last sermon on the book of Numbers covered a whole chapter—89 verses. Today, we will zero in on just four verses. The general subject is the arrangement of the lamps in the tabernacle.

Think of how important light is. We can hardly imagine life without it. It is highly significant that during creation week, the first thing that God created was *light*. We read that “the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be *light*: and there was *light*.”

God *spoke* the world into existence. He created light on the first day, and didn’t create the light *bearers*—the sun, moon and stars—until the fourth day. Pagans worship the sun, moon and stars. But the Bible shows that the sun and moon are not ultimate; *God* is ultimate. The sun is a *creature*—a created thing dependent on Almighty God for its existence. It is irrational and senseless for the creature (man) to worship another creature (the heavenly bodies). It is a violation of the first commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” The only thing worthy of our worship is Almighty God, and the only way of approaching God is through the only Mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ, who became man and perfectly fulfilled God’s law on behalf of unworthy sinners.

We are thankful for light. In the Gospel of John, the man who was born blind had never seen the light of day until Jesus anointed his eyes with a mixture of clay and spittle and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man did that, and his sight was restored! It was a true miracle. In like manner we ourselves were spiritually blind until the Lord saved us by the supernatural regenerating work of his Holy Spirit. At that moment he opened our hearts, and we received a new nature. Old things were passed away; behold, all things were become new. We who are born again can say with the man born blind: “One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.”¹ Though once we were spiritually blind—we thought we were good people, we didn’t know we were under God’s wrath, the gospel made no sense to us, we thought we could save ourselves if we just tried hard enough—when the Lord opened our eyes to the gospel, we saw the glory of Christ, we suddenly realized he is the perfect Savior who loved us with an everlasting love. We desire fellowship with God more than anything else in this world. We are his willing worshipers who want everyone in the world to love the Savior. Once we were blind, now we see. He is the true Light.

¹ John 9:25

Nature itself teaches us the importance of light. When we go into a dark place—a dark room, or most dramatically, a cave deep in the ground—if we have a lamp, that is a blessing.

We read in our text this morning that Moses was told to instruct Aaron: “When you set up the *lamps*, the seven lamps shall give *light* in front of the *lampstand*” (ESV). The lampstand that is referred to (called a *candlestick* in the historic English translations from 1382–1611) was a large, decorative stand holding seven individual oil lamps. These were small pottery or metal jars with spouts, each holding a quantity of oil and a wick, which when burned, produced light. The lamps used in the tabernacle were fueled by olive oil that was supplied by the congregation. Olive oil is plentiful in the Middle East.

There are two pictures in today’s bulletin to give you some idea of what the lampstand and the lamps looked like. There was a massive lampstand made of pure gold of about a talent in weight (57 pounds: that’s a lot of gold!)—a large, sturdy fixture holding seven oil lamps.² The seven lamps were small, handheld vessels made of clay or metal, shaped like a teapot or pitcher, designed to hold a supply of oil, with a wick made of flax or other fibers. In the case of the lamps used in the tabernacle, they were lit with fire from off the altar. It symbolized the light of God’s presence among his people. The Hebrew word for lampstand is מְנוֹרָה (*menōrah*³). You can find the word *menorah* in an English dictionary. It is described as a candelabrum used in Jewish worship. The middle syllable *nor* is a Hebrew word meaning *light*. The menorah had a heavy base, so it wouldn’t tip easily.

A lamp is a device for giving light when natural light is insufficient or unavailable. Lamps were needed in the tabernacle—a large tent containing the holy place and the most holy place. This tent was made of curtains woven of fine linen, blue, purple, and scarlet thread, covered with a layer of goat hair, then a tent of ram skins dyed red, then a covering of badger skins above that. All these layers were necessary to keep the weather out, but they also made the interior of the tent very dark—hence, the need for light.

The lampstand in the tabernacle with its lamps provided physical light, enabling the priests to perform their duties. God was very specific about where the lampstand was to be placed. It was to be set on the south side near the tent wall. The priest would enter the tabernacle on the east side. The lampstand would be on his left—that is, the south side—with its lamps shining towards the north, illuminating the table of *showbread* (לֶחֶם פְּנִים), literally the *bread of the presence*, representing the presence of Almighty God in the midst of his people,

² Singular נֶר

³ From the root נָוַר meaning *light*

foreshadowing the communion bread. The tabernacle was the place of God's throne on earth. It was the place where God was worshiped.

The series of seven lamps were lined up in a row running from east to west. The individual lamps were to be positioned to direct their light across the room to the north, illuminating the table of showbread, and also illuminating the altar of incense with the curtain behind it veiling the Most Holy Place, where the high priest could go only once a year on the Day of Atonement. There was no need of a lampstand in the inner room, the Holy of Holies, for the glory of God was its light. In Exodus 40 we read that when the tabernacle was finished and set up, "Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." So there was no lampstand in the Most Holy Place, only the one in the outer room, the Holy Place.

Aaron and his sons were responsible to set up the lampstand and arrange the seven lamps exactly as God had commanded. They were also responsible to tend the lamps, to keep them supplied with oil, and to carefully trim the wicks, so that they would burn brightly. The lamps were lit with fire from off the altar of burnt offering. They were to burn constantly and never be allowed to go out.

Verse 3 of our text records that "Aaron did so; he arranged the lamps to face toward the front of the lampstand, as the LORD commanded Moses." "Aaron did so"! It is always encouraging to hear that the saints of God did what they were commanded to do. This is an example for all of us. Whatever is taught in the Bible we are to believe. Whatever is commanded in the Bible we are to do. The church does not have to believe things that are not taught in or properly deduced from Scripture. The church has no authority to teach or command merely on its own authority. Our responsibility is to do whatever the LORD commands. At the end of verse 4 we find it repeated: "According to the pattern which the LORD had shown Moses, so he made the lampstand."

Verse 4 adds an interesting detail concerning the construction of the lampstand. It was made of "hammered gold"—that is, solid gold. "From its shaft to its flowers it was hammered work." It was not merely "overlaid with gold," as the four pillars that held up the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. It was not overlaid with gold as the boards, bars and staves; as the table of showbread; or the altar of incense. The lampstand alone out of all the tabernacle's furnishings was made of hammered gold—solid gold. It was made of one piece.

I bought a mop one time on the internet. It arrived in a small box, which had me concerned, and when I opened it, I found I had to assemble the mop handle from three pieces that screwed together. It was very clever. It was made to fit in a small

shipping box. But it didn't seem to be as strong as a traditional mop handle made of a single piece of hardwood.

But the lampstand in the tabernacle was not put together from parts. It was not hollow. It was made of solid gold. The lampstand, along with its snuff dishes and tongs, was made of a talent of pure gold.⁴ It would be worth a fortune if it were melted down and made into krugerrands or some other valuable gold coin. It was likely the most valuable and most expensive item in the tabernacle. Here was gold that the Egyptians gave Israel when the death angel killed the firstborn in every house. The Egyptians were so intent on sending Israel away that they said, "Take this gold—just go!" The value that the Egyptians had saved up by enslaving Israel was given in one lump-sum payment, and was given by the people in order to construct the place of God's worship. In like manner in our own day God uses the gifts of his people to finance his worship.

The lampstand was made to light up the dim interior of the tabernacle. Its light specifically shone on the table of showbread, the bread of the presence. This table of showbread held twelve loaves—one for each of the twelve tribes—replaced with fresh bread weekly. These loaves were holy to the LORD. They illustrated how the LORD fed and cared for his people. They were replaced every Sabbath, every Saturday, under the old dispensation. And they couldn't be just discarded. They were holy. Every Sabbath, Aaron and his sons were to eat the bread put out the previous week. The showbread in the tabernacle foreshadowed the bread of holy communion in the church today. It couldn't be left to languish in darkness—no! God provided that the lampstand with its lamps would shine upon it. God wanted to emphasize the truth that he *feeds* his people. The Psalmist would pray, "Thou preparest a *table* before me in the presence of mine enemies." In the midst of this vale of tears—this world of scarcity—God feeds his people. This should be something that we want to share with the world. We should want to showcase the Lord's supper. I read of a seeker-friendly church that didn't have the Lord's supper on Sundays, as doing so would make the service too long and might make visitors uncomfortable. So the church would have the Lord's supper on a week night, when only the committed would be present.

The lampstand, now complete, was set up in the tabernacle. The seven lamps had to be set in place, filled with olive oil, fitted with wicks trimmed to give maximum light, illuminating the Holy Place. This light symbolized the light of God's presence among his people. This light shone nowhere else in the whole world. It is called in Scripture *the light of God's countenance*. It indicates that God is favorable toward his people. The Psalmist prayed, "LORD, lift thou up *the light of thy countenance* upon us . . . For they got not the land in possession by their own

⁴ Ex. 25:39

sword, neither did their own arm save them: but thy right hand, and thine arm, and *the light of thy countenance*, because thou hadst a favor unto them. . . . Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O LORD, *in the light of thy countenance.*”⁵ The light of God’s countenance indicated his favor shown upon his people. The Aaronic blessing, which we preached on at the end of Numbers 6, ends with the words “The LORD *lift up his countenance upon thee*, and give thee peace.” Here is a blessing unique to the covenant people. God’s people alone, of all the peoples in the world, have the assurance of the light of God’s countenance upon them. Even if they are in the midst of trial, they can be assured that their loving Father will never leave them or forsake them.

At the beginning God created *light*. He gave the sun to rule the day, and the moon to rule the night. He gave stars for navigation and for direction, and to mark the seasons. The Holy Scriptures are likened to lamps. The Psalmist writes: “Thy word is a *lamp* unto my feet, and a *light* unto my path.”⁶ As he says a few verses later, “The entrance of thy words giveth *light*; it giveth understanding unto the simple.” If we live obediently by the light of the Holy Scriptures we can claim the promise of Isaiah 58:8, “Then shall thy *light* break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rear ward [rear guard].”⁷ God will bless us and enable us to be a light to the nations. “Ye are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14).

The Lord Jesus Christ is the true light, the fulfillment of the lampstand. At the beginning of his Gospel John wrote: “In him was life; and the life was the *light* of men. And the *light* shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was *the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.*”

Jesus alone could say, “I am *the light of the world*: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). God sheds his light abroad as his church worships according to his Word. The Word is one of the ordinary means of grace—the Word, prayer, and the holy sacraments. As the church worships, God’s people are spiritually fed. Every Christian ought to attend the worship of God unless he is providentially hindered—that is, ill in bed, or his car won’t start, or he is snowed in, or some other situation beyond his control. If we have to miss a sermon, we should listen to it later if at all possible. We should be *more* knowledgeable rather than less so. Each of us should make the effort to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

⁵ Ps. 4:6; 44:3; 89:15

⁶ Ps. 119:105. This verse uses both “lamp” [נֵר] and “light” [אֹר] in parallel.

⁷ Translation mine

Knowledge of the Scriptures is not innate. We are not born with it. We have to learn it, line upon line, precept upon precept, meditating on it, savoring its truth, applying it to our life, praying over it, constantly reviewing it. All of us need *more* understanding, not less. We need our lives to be fully formed after the image of Christ. His truth is the most important thing in the world. “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” How often we chase the vanities of this world, and how little time we give to God!

Every time Israel traveled, before the tabernacle could be used for worship, everything had to be set up according to God’s instructions. Aaron had to set up the lamps—fill them with oil, light them with fire taken from off the altar, and arrange them exactly as God had directed. Under the ceremonial law, which passed away when it was fulfilled in Christ, the oil had to be constantly replenished. But a day would come when the lamps would be supplied with an abundance of oil. This we learn in Zechariah 4. Turn with me if you will. Zechariah is the second-to-last prophet of the Old Testament, just before Malachi. I’ll begin reading at verse 1. The prophet says:

“Now the angel who talked with me came back and wakened me, as a man who is wakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, ‘What do you see?’ So I said, ‘I am looking, and there is a lampstand of solid gold with a bowl on top of it, and on the stand seven lamps with seven pipes to the seven lamps. Two olive trees are by it, one at the right of the bowl and the other at its left.’ So I answered and spoke to the angel who talked with me, saying, ‘What are these, my lord?’ Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ And I said, ‘No, my lord.’ So he answered and said to me: ‘This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the LORD of hosts.’”” (Zech. 4:1–6).

Under the Old Testament the lamps in the tabernacle had to be replenished with oil daily, so they wouldn’t go out, but when the True Light came and poured out his Spirit upon his church, there would be a continuous fresh supply of oil (called in Scripture the “oil of gladness”⁸), sufficient to empower the church to carry the Gospel not only to the Jews, but to all nations under heaven. That which was revealed *in part* in the Old Testament would be *fulfilled perfectly* in Christ. Before he ascended up to heaven he gave the church its Great Commission, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” When he went away,

⁸ Ps. 45:7, Heb. 1:9

he would pour out his Spirit upon his church who would empower us to fulfill the Great Commission, to take the Gospel to the nations.

That is where we are today, beloved. Let us yield ourselves to him and depend upon him daily, faithfully supporting the work of missions and praying for opportunities to let our light so shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father who is in heaven.⁹ Amen.

⁹ Matt. 5:16