

How to Make a Filthy Heart Clean

Exodus 30:17-21

Exodus 30:17-21, 38:8

The LORD said to Moses, "You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations." . . .

38:8 *He made the basin of bronze and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered in the entrance of the tent of meeting.*

First: The Bronze Basin

We don't have to overcomplicate things to understand the plain meaning of this text. This passage is set within a larger portion of Exodus (Ch. 25-30) in which God is giving instructions on how to build the tabernacle, and, in this brief section, the Lord is directing the Israelites to build and use a wash basin. God was requiring that the priests use this basin to clean their hands and feet prior to ministering at the altar or entering the tent of meeting. There is no lengthy description of the shape, dimensions, symbols, or the tools and methods that ought to be used to create it. There is also no other commentary from the biblical authors that explicitly elaborates upon the details of this bronze basin. The main point that God is communicating is simply to make a bronze basin and fill it with water for the priests to wash their hands and feet before they approach either the altar or the tent, because without that cleansing they will die.

Side note: Taken as a standalone text, the threat of death certainly stands out here, but it was a common penalty for disobeying commands related to priestly service in the tabernacle. For example, they had to wear the priestly garments (Ex. 28:35), cover their nakedness (Ex. 28:42-43), not drink wine or strong drink before entering the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 10:9), and only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and only on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2). Additionally, Aaron's sons are later executed by God for putting on the altar things which the Lord didn't command (Lev. 10:1). The broad application of the death penalty communicates the perfect holiness of God and his absolute prohibition against

sin. In some ways, this mirrors the garden of Eden, where a single disobedience in the presence of God earned a death sentence.

While the main point of the passage may be straightforward, the implications, questions, and application of this text to our present lives is where things get a little more difficult to uncover, because there is little detail provided within the immediate context. So, to get more meaning from this text, we have to search for that meaning within the broader context of the Bible. Thankfully, we are told specifically that the tabernacle was intended to point toward something greater. *Hebrews 8:5 says, "They [the priests] serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things."* The Bible itself instructs us to look at the tabernacle and all its elements and rituals as a very real metaphor revealing something true about eternal, heavenly realities.

So, our question then becomes *what is this bronze basin revealing about spiritual realities? What does this teach me about how I relate to God?*

Second: Looking Past the Shadows

In our effort to look beyond the plain and obvious, we need to be careful not to devote ourselves to speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith (1 Tim. 1:4). The value of our meditations on the basin—or any passage—will be determined by whether it leads us toward greater faith in the Truth, and the Truth is a man named Jesus Christ (John 14:6) who is revealed by the word of God (John 5:39). For our faith in Christ to grow, we must come to understand something real and true about who Jesus is and what he has done, and then build our hope upon those truths.

That being understood, let's venture forward prayerfully, and see if we can't move further up and further in. (Hope things are well in Ireland, Reggie. ;)

To understand the basin better, two of the most helpful things we can consider are its location and its function.

From the altar to the basin

The bronze basin, being located between the altar and the Tent of Meeting, was a station the priests were required to visit after offering sacrifices but before entering the presence of God. Atonement was not secured at the basin, for that was already done at the altar. The shed blood of the sacrifice at the altar purchased forgiveness (Heb. 9:22)

by satisfying the wrath of God and taking away the guilt of sin. So as the priest approached the basin, the guilt of sin was no longer an issue that had to be dealt with. In New Testament terms, we would say that *justification* had already been accomplished. But if that's true, then why does God threaten death to anyone who does not first stop at the basin to wash themselves? Was the sacrifice not enough? Let's not go that far. Rather, we should see that the basin illustrates that the redemptive work of God is more than just forgiveness—it's bigger than that. God's salvation is so complete that he doesn't only want to take away the guilt, but he also wants to make you clean.

Called into the presence of holiness

Picture yourself standing in this moment: you've just cut a bull's throat and collected its blood and thrown it against the altar, and then cut the animal into pieces and separated its parts, and then burned it on the altar. A place to wash up probably sounds like a great idea right now, especially considering that you are about to walk into the presence of God.

Most people—across all ages and cultures—already have an intuitive understanding that we need to be made clean before we present ourselves to others for evaluation. This happens in every sphere of life: from religion to relationships.

- Religious adherents wash themselves before entering holy places (e.g. Shinto shrines in Japan)
- We clean our homes before having company over, and our workplaces before CEOs visit.
- We take a shower and put on nice clothes before we go out on a date night.

If we seek to make ourselves clean before others, then how much more should we be concerned with our cleanliness before God, whose holiness is beyond anything we've ever seen before.

Exodus 19:9-12, 16-18

And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever."

When Moses told the words of the people to the LORD, the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around,

saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

Exodus 20:18-21

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

God's holiness is so great and powerful that it's intimidating, and that isn't an accident. It's meant to make us uncomfortable with sin. (cf. Isaiah 6:1-5)

Underdressed for the occasion

Apprehending God's holiness should cause us to see ourselves as unworthy even just to stand in his presence. It is God's standards for cleanliness—not ours—that determine who and what is able to come near into his presence and what is to be cast out as unclean.

Lev. 10:3; 15:31

"This is what the Lord has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified. . . Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.' "

If we consider the possibility of personally entering into the presence of God and we are not overcome with an overwhelming sense of our own unworthiness, then we haven't understood enough about God's holiness. God is so holy that it is deadly just to look upon him. "You cannot see my face," says the Lord, "for man shall not see me and live." (Ex. 33:20)

We need to be made clean

I don't think we're meant to look at this bronze basin and the washing of water only to make some trivial observations which do nothing to stir our hearts to action.

The laver provides a picture of where Israel exists in the story, and where the church is right now: the sacrifice has been offered, and now you are invited into the presence of God. You were once slaves, but are now free, and though the guilt of sin is gone, you still need to be made clean. With each passing day, we are being drawn closer and closer to the moment where we will each stand in the presence of God (Revelation 20:11-12), and, without cleansing, we're still covered in the dirt of the world—unclean in the eyes of God. But God doesn't leave us in our uncleanness; he offers us water for our cleansing. If we understand the gravity of this situation at all then we're going to see that water—that cleansing—not as merely interesting, but as *necessary*. We're going to respond like the woman who sat at the well with Jesus and said, "Sir, give me this water," or like Peter, who said, "Lord, don't wash my feet only but my head also!"

But what did washing with water really accomplish? In the imagery of the tabernacle, the priests only had to wash their hands and feet in the water of the basin to be made clean before God. But is water all we really need? A little water might rinse away the dirt, but it's not just our bodies that are covered in grime. Our hearts also defile and condemn us before God.

Matthew 15:10, 18-20a

"Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person. . . what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person."

No amount of water—nothing in all the world—is going to be able clean your heart. Not even the bronze basin was able to make the hearts of any of those priests clean. But it did point to something greater.

Third: Washed by the Spirit, washed in the Word

Just as the altar pointed to the perfect work of atonement that would eventually come through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the basin points to the cleansing work of sanctification purchased by Christ and completed in the Holy Spirit. The word sanctification means, "to be made pure and holy." This isn't a mere hand washing; this is total purification from the inside out. And it's all made possible because of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

Titus 3:4-6

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

Hebrews 10:22

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

1 Peter 3:21

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Ephesians 5:26

love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Conclusion / Bottom Line

As we contemplate being drawn into the presence of God, our hearts need to be stirred to see God's holiness and our own sinfulness, and then to come to Jesus as the only one who can make us clean. We need to be like the leper, who saw Jesus, and "came to him and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.' And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. (Matt. 8:1-3)

If my lingering guilt tempts me to withdraw from God's presence and to believe that I could never truly be made clean, then I haven't understood enough about Christ's sacrifice. We must remember that when we present ourselves to be cleaned, we already have full confidence that forgiveness has been purchased at the altar by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The God who knelt down with a towel and a basin to wash the foot of his disciples, kneels before you ready to wash your feet—ready to make you completely clean so that he can joyfully present you to his Father as a beloved bride. All we have to do, is submit ourselves to it.

Community Groups

1. Read the text
2. What does a plain reading of Exodus 30:17-21 reveal as the main idea of the text?
3. How does Hebrews 8:5 help us to see meaning in this text beyond the obvious?
4. Where should we look to find more meaning in this passage?
5. What do the location of the basin and its function help to reveal in terms of deeper spiritual realities?
6. What was accomplished at the altar that enabled the priest to move onward toward the Tent of Meeting? What New Testament word would we use to describe this?
7. Why does God threaten death to anyone who does not first stop at the basin to wash themselves? Was the sacrifice not enough?
8. How do our own lives demonstrate an intuitive understanding of our need to be made clean?
9. What is God's overwhelming holiness intended to produce in us? (Exodus 20:18-21)
10. How should our hearts respond to God's offer to cleanse us? If our hearts don't feel a desire for the cleansing work of God, then how might that motivate our prayers?
11. Why couldn't the basin and the water make one clean? (Matthew 15:10, 18-20a)
12. The altar pointed to *justification*. What does the bronze basin point to?

13. How does Christ's loving sacrifice give us confidence to present ourselves to God (Hebrews 10:22)?
14. What does Ephesians 5:26 reveal about how Christ washes us?