

### **A Pattern to Follow**

Why is it that we have a hard time remembering a friend's birthday but we can't forget the words to the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*? It has to do with how our brains are designed by God. In an article in *The New York Times*, writer Natalie Angier quotes Michael Thaut, professor of music and neuroscience at Colorado State University. He says, "The brain has a strong propensity to organize information and perception in patterns, and music plays into that inclination. It would be a virtually impossible task for young children to memorize a sequence of 26 separate letters if you just gave it to them as a string of information," but when the alphabet is set to the tune of the ABC song, preschoolers can learn it with ease.<sup>1</sup> There's great power in information being organized in patterns.

Much of the Old Testament is God establishing patterns to guide us into a life of grace. In Creation there is the pattern of the seasons. In the Law, God was establishing a pattern of right and wrong. In the seven Jewish Feasts, God was establishing a pattern of worship for His people. And in the Tabernacle, located at the center of their community, God established a pattern of not only how to come to Him but also how to walk with Him, how to journey with Him; how to live with Him.

In Numbers 8 and 9, God is instructing Moses concerning the Tabernacle. He's showing him the pattern. This is not only relevant for the nation of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. This pattern is eternal. This pattern is for us as well. Let's see what it is. First, God shows Moses...

#### **I. The Pattern of the Tabernacle Furnishings.**

Technically here in Numbers 8 God only mentions one of the seven pieces of Tabernacle furnishings, the golden lampstand. But let me show you all of them because you can't really understand them fully by only examining one.

[Show Tabernacle, image #1]

This is what the Tabernacle looked like. Essentially, it was a portable Temple. When the permanent Temple was finally built by Solomon in Jerusalem, it contained the same furnishings as the Tabernacle only bigger and more permanent. As the book of Hebrews points out, almost everything in the Tabernacle symbolized something to do with Christ.

First, as you entered the Outer Court, you came to the Bronze Altar where burnt sacrifices were offered.

[Show Bronze Altar, image #2]

What did this symbolize? This symbolized the death of Christ on the cross. Eph. 5:2 explains this:

**...and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

Hebrews chapter 10 describes how this relates to the Law of the Old Testament:

**The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves... Therefore when Christ came into the world He said:**

**“Sacrifices and offering you did not desire,  
but a body you prepared for me;  
with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.  
Then I said, ‘Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll-  
I have come to do your will, O God.’”** (Heb. 10:1 and Ps. 40:6-8 quoted in  
Heb. 10:5-7)

So, the first thing a person saw coming into the Tabernacle was the Bronze Altar which represented the future “real” sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, their sins were forgiven, just like ours; not by animal sacrifices.

The second thing you saw was the bronze Laver or basin for washing.

[Show Laver, image #3]

This symbolizes being cleansed spiritually, or in New Testament terminology, being sanctified. Notice the pattern here, notice the order of things! It is very important. You aren’t cleansed THEN saved; you are saved, then sanctified. How many people today think, “if I am good enough, I’ll go to heaven.” No, no, a thousand times no. The Tabernacle pattern teaches us the order – we identify with the sacrifice of Christ THEN we are washed, THEN we are sanctified. This is why infant baptism is wrong. Baptism represents the washing away of our sins. That can’t happen until we’ve come to the cross (the bronze altar) and identified with the sacrifice of Christ.

Now, only the priests could offer sacrifices at the altar and only priests could use the Basin for washing and only priests could go into the Holy Place inside the tent. But Peter tells us clearly what this Old Testament practice symbolized. It symbolized all Christians in the New Testament. He said we’re all priests in Christ:

**As you come to him, the living Stone... you also, like living stones, are  
being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering  
spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...**

(I Peter 2:4, 5)

So, the priests of the Old Testament are Christians of the New Testament. By Christ’s sacrifice we are qualified to enter into the Holy Place but we must wash before we go in. Do you do that each week BEFORE worship? We sometimes think that worship is where we get washed, but that’s NOT the pattern. The Holy Place is where real worship took place and the priests always washed before they went in.

Have you ever walked out of worship and thought, “Eesh, that didn’t do much for me. The preaching was dull, the music was off; it just felt cold.” Maybe it wasn’t the preacher, the music or the air conditioning. Maybe you hadn’t washed! God is the One who established this pattern! He says, “If you aren’t clean, you’re meeting with yourself. I’m not showing up.” We need to go to the Laver BEFORE worship.

So, we’ve been to the Altar and the Laver now we’re ready to go into the presence of God in the Holy Place which contains three more pieces of furniture – the golden lampstand, the table of showbread and the table of incense.

[Show Holy Place, image #4]

All three of these symbolize a close, personal and warm relationship with God. The golden lampstand points us directly to Christ. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). There were no windows in the Holy Place so this lampstand was the only light. You couldn’t see the table of bread or the altar of incense without

the lampstand. You can't have fellowship with God or with other "priests" without the light of Christ.

The table of bread represented God's provision for His people. There were 12 pieces of unleavened bread, one for each tribe. The bread symbolized the Word of God. It is by devouring the Word of God, illuminated Christ, that our souls are fed.

The third piece of furniture in the Holy Place was the Altar of Incense. Coals were brought from the bronze Altar and placed in this mini-altar where incense was burned. The incense symbolized prayer according to the description of worship at the heavenly throne in Rev. 8:3, 4:

**Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand.**

Now, God made it very clear that the coals for this Altar of Incense could only come from the Altar of Burnt Offering. Anything else was considered "unauthorized fire" and was punishable by death, which is what happened to two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. They brought "unauthorized fire" into the Holy Place and they died right there. What's that all about?

Remember, this incense wafting toward the ceiling symbolizes prayer. That incense can only be ignited by coals from the Altar of Sacrifice. In other words, prayer in any other name but Jesus Christ's is useless and actually dangerous. We hear a lot these days about "Interfaith Prayer Meetings." This is not a biblical concept. We are to pray ONLY in the Name of Jesus. If you pray in any other name, you are playing with "unauthorized fire." Our God is a One-Way God.

The last two pieces of furniture are behind the next curtain in the Holy of Holies. They are the Ark of the Covenant which has on top of it the Mercy Seat. These also point directly to Christ who is the fulfillment of the Law and the means by which we can obtain mercy from God.

We've covered a lot of ground with these seven pieces of Tabernacle furniture. They point us to Christ – His sacrifice, His cleansing, His light, His provision, His intercession with us and for us and His law of love and mercy. But there are more patterns for us to see in this passage as well. Next is...

## **II. The Pattern of the Levites.**

The Levites were separate from the priests. They would be the equivalent of lay people in the church today. Num. 8: 5, 6, 15 says:

**The LORD said to Moses: "Take the Levites from among the other Israelites and make them ceremonially clean... After you have purified the Levites... they are to come to do their work at the Tent of Meeting.**

Serving God in the church is unlike any other volunteer position. If you volunteer at your children's school or as a youth coach or at the nursing home; your success will be determined by your work, your effort. That is not the case if you volunteer to do ministry for Christ's kingdom. Your success will not be determined by your work, your effort, but by your submission to the Spirit of God. Did you see what God said to Moses? He didn't say, "Choose Levites who are the most gifted, who have the most potential and then train them thoroughly." God wasn't concerned

about how gifted they were or how intelligent they were or how much potential they had. No, God was concerned about one thing – how clean they were! And God details a four-step process for spiritual purification:

Step 1 – “*Sprinkle the water of cleansing on them...*” v. 7 Acts 22:16 says, “*What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.*” Baptism is a New Testament step of cleansing.

Step 2 – “*...have them shave their whole bodies...*” v. 7 Heb. 4:12 says, “*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*” Do you read the Word of God so that it can cleanse you, do surgery on you or do you only read the parts that give you a rah-rah pat on the back? Going under the knife of God’s Word is where deeper cleansing comes from.

Step 3 – “*...and wash their clothes...*” v. 7 Garments often represent behavioral habits in Scripture. Do you have any inappropriate habits? Throw them out if you want to be successful serving the Lord.

Step 4 – “*...take a young bull... for a sin offering...*” v. 8 All the sin offerings were focused on the work of Christ for us on the cross. Before we begin a volunteer ministry, do we have that picture in mind? Are we doing this to make His name great or to make our name great?

This was the four-step process of cleansing that every Levite went through. If we are likewise spiritually clean as we go into ministry, then we WILL be successful because, in God’s eyes, success isn’t a matter of attendance or using the latest methods or having the most popular ministry in the region. It’s about faithfulness and commitment to Him. J. Vernon McGee puts it this way:

The important thing for the child of God today is not *how* you walk, but *where* you walk. “*...if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*” (I John 1:7)

The Levites had to be clean to be successful. If we regularly are being washed by the Word of God, through His Spirit, we will be outrageously successful in Jesus’ eyes. Lastly, in chapter 9 we need to see...

### **III. The Pattern of the Cloud.**

We come finally, to this physical manifestation of the presence of God. By day it looked like a cloud and by night it looked like fire. It had been with them since they left Egypt, but now, Numbers 9 says:

**On the day the tabernacle... was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire.** (Num. 9:15, 16)

Have you ever felt abandoned by friends, separated from the presence of God and know that you deserved it? R. A. Dickey was voted the best pitcher in the National League last year, but just 7 years ago, he felt abandoned. In his autobiography, he described what his life had become:

I am a minor-league lifer whose career has been one prolonged disappointment. I am a man who was sexually abused as a child, with no

equipment to deal with that trauma. I am a man who desperately wants to bury the truth of his past, but there's no hole deep enough to do it. I am a hypocrite, a man who masquerades as a devout Christian who has betrayed his wife and God. My self-esteem is so low, it doesn't even have a reading. God has blessed me with health and intelligence and a beautiful family, and look at where I've led them. I've turned my life into a hopeless tangle of problems... *"Why would God want to help someone like me?"*

R.A. was hanging on to life by a thread when he pulled into the parking lot of a Christian counselor named Stephen in the summer of 2006. He writes:

It's the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. I tell Stephen about the babysitter (who abused him as a child). I tell him about the fights in school, the reckless risk taking, and the secrets I kept from Anne (his wife)...

I tell him all about the guilt and shame I've lived with, sure that if people knew the real R. A. Dickey, they would want nothing to do with him. I tell Stephen that now that he knows all this, I am terrified that he will leave me, too, the way so many others have...

Stephen says, "I will not leave you R. A. I promise you that I will never leave you." The room is still. He looks me in the eye. I don't want to look back at him. Stephen says, "Look at me and listen to me, R. A.: I will never leave you."

As the weeks turn into months, the scabs gradually get peeled off all the old wounds... It's as if somebody backed up a garbage truck to the house and dumped every last thing on the front lawn. Where do you start picking things up, and where do you put them?

I don't know. I have no clue. But I do know Stephen will be there to help me find out how. He is the first human being I have ever unconditionally trusted... Even in my pain I know what a blessing that is. <sup>ii</sup>

As we will see in the weeks ahead, the Israelites will mess up and mess up bad. Like R. A. Dickey, they break vows they made to God and bring shame and horrible consequences on themselves. They are forced by God to leave the border of the Land of Promise and go wander in the wilderness for the next 40 years. And just when they began thinking what R. A. was thinking, "Why would God want to help somebody like us?" – what do they see? Every morning, they see the cloud of His Presence is with them. And every night, the pillar of fire is still there. God proves to be the God who will never leave us... never! God had promised them in Lev. 26:

**I will put my dwelling place among you...** (Literally, "I will tabernacle among you) **I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people.** (Lev. 26:11, 12)

These are just three of the patterns of God here in Numbers that all transfer to our world today because we worship a God who does not change – He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He loves you unconditionally and He will never leave you. He promised. So, what will you do? Will you do what R. A. Dickey did? Re-commit your life to God as a daily follower of Jesus Christ. Because R. A. Dickey did that, God saved his marriage, his career, his life. As R. A. says at the end of his book: *"Thank you, merciful God, for all these blessings and more, for giving me the courage to stop hiding, and the courage to find a new way."* That is the only pattern to follow. Let's pray...

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- <sup>i</sup> Natalie Angier, “In One Ear and Out the Other,” [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (3/17/09)
- <sup>ii</sup> R. A. Dickey, *Wherever I Wind Up* (New York: Penguin Group, 2012), pp. 192,193; 197-198