



Hand Over Your Mirrors

March

Exodus 30:17-21; 38:8

We don't always like what we see in the mirror, but imagine how difficult life would be without it.

On a recent trip to Central Asia, I met a woman who had very little. She lived in an abandoned gas station surrounded by dry, desolate dirt. She and her little family lived in a building that was never meant to be inhabited—lacking electricity, running water, or even a primitive toilet. And yet, I noticed she had hung a small fragment of a broken mirror on her adobe wall.

In the ancient world, most women never owned a mirror. Centuries before glass mirrors were invented, wealthy women in Turkey, Egypt, Japan, and China saw their reflections in ornately decorated mirrors made of highly polished metals such as copper or bronze. Though not as efficient as glass mirrors would be, they gave at least a hazy reflection of the person looking into them. Women of means carried them around and they were sometimes used in religious rituals. Some ancient mirrors included engravings of gods or goddesses.

Exodus 38:8 is a fascinating verse easily overlooked in a daily Bible reading plan. This short verse is the focus of this month's Bible study:

“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.”

Rags to Riches

After 430 years of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites had been delivered by God's miraculous hand. They experienced the miracle of the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea. They ate manna and quail provided by God's hand and drank fresh water from a rock.

Moses received instructions from God Himself on how to build a tabernacle where His people could worship Him. Bezalel, the “he” in Exodus 38:8, was appointed to oversee the construction site, making sure to follow all of God's instructions.

To accomplish such a building project, the people were called upon to make donations. But after four centuries of slavery, they couldn't have much to offer in the way of money, jewelry, or finery. Could they?

Well, we read in Exodus 12, before leaving Egypt, Moses instructed all the women of Israel to borrow everything they could from their Egyptian mistresses. The Bible records the people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. The LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, and they let them have what they asked. Thus, they plundered the Egyptians.

This plunder came in handy when the offering plate was later passed. The first rounds yielded gold and silver jewelry and expensive fabrics used to craft many of the tabernacle's components. In fact, Moses had to tell them to stop bringing in gold because they already had enough!

The inventory of their offerings listed in Exodus 35:20-29 reminds me of an exhibit I once saw of Egyptian treasures from King Tut's tomb:

“They brought brooches, earrings, signet rings, armlets, all sorts of gold objects, blue or purple or scarlet yarns, fine linen, silver, bronze, acacia wood, onyx stones, stones to be set, spices, oil, and fragrant incense.”

Perhaps more impressive than the intrinsic value of their haul, though, is the description of the hearts of the people.

“And they came, *everyone whose heart stirred him, and everyone whose spirit moved him*, and brought the LORD's contribution to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the holy garments. So they came, both men and women. *All who were of a willing heart...*”

“All the *women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill* spun the goats' hair” (Exodus 35:26).

“All the men and women, the people of Israel, *whose heart moved them* to bring anything for the work that

the LORD had commanded by Moses to be done brought it as a freewill offering to the LORD” (Exodus 35:29).

Go back and read the italicized words again. The people’s hearts were stirred, moved, and willing to contribute their possessions, skills, and labor.

Imagine after more than four centuries of enslavement, deprivation, and hard labor, they finally came into possession of all those luxury items. In that context, it is impressive they willingly gave up their new-found treasures to build the new place of worship.

Women in Ministry

In Exodus 38:8, we return to the focus of our study: **“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.”**

We can only speculate as to the identity of these “ministering women” and the nature of their service. This obscure and lone reference leaves many unanswered questions. What was the nature of their service?

The Hebrew verb used for “to minister” or “to perform tasks” is most often associated with military groupings. Perhaps this indicates the women were organized into shifts to keep their specific service orderly and continuous. It is possible in this era, before the formalization of priestly and Levitical functions, women played an assisting role in the Tabernacle, though that is only speculation. It is also possible their service was more of a practical nature, maintaining supplies or cleaning. Some speculate they aided in the preparation of food.

In the context of modern church culture, we tend to imagine them passing out bulletins and greeting those who come in the door, but this seems very unlikely to be the nature of their service. It is better to look at other Old Testament passages for hints of what kinds of service women were involved in.

It could be Moses’ sister Miriam gives us an idea. Just

after the Israelites had miraculously passed through the Red Sea we read in Exodus 15:20-21 that “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.”

Maybe the women gathered at the entrance with their instruments, singing, dancing, and praising God—a kind of prelude to the worship that would take place inside.

Unfortunately, we simply do not know what kind of ministry they were involved in. We only know they were known for their consistent service at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

A Sacrificial Spirit

It seems these women are included in Scripture not so much for the tasks they performed as for their spirit of sacrifice. Whatever the nature of their daily ministry at the Tabernacle, the significant point is they donated their treasures for its construction.

When it came time to craft the bronze altar, Bezalel passed the offering plate again. This time, he was asking for items made of bronze. Each woman may have fingered her treasured mirror with a sigh as the plea was made—another round of sacrifice.

Was it difficult for these women to give up their fancy mirrors? They’d already given up most of the luxury items they’d packed and carried out of Egypt, and it seems they gave them willingly. They had readily used their skills and time to weave beautiful linens and fabrics for the Tabernacle. As previous slaves, they undoubtedly enjoyed carrying their beautifully carved and polished mirrors with them as they went about their days. It must have felt good to look at their reflection in the same way the wealthy ladies of Egypt had.

To give up their treasured possessions required a generous heart of sacrifice. After all, they couldn’t just go

to Target and replace them. They had no hope of ever owning anything else so lovely and fine.

These women are exemplary. They willingly gave up their treasured possessions for the sake of the Lord's work. They once again became women without mirrors, underlining the fact their focus was not on themselves and their physical appearance. The focus was not on their material possessions but on their longing to worship God and praise Him in His dwelling place.

Women Not Allowed

The sacrifice these women made becomes even more impressive when we look at how their mirrors were actually used. They would never be allowed to use the bronze basin made from their mirrors. They didn't even get to look at a plaque on a pew each Sunday acknowledging their offering.

Though we read accounts of prophetesses and other women who ministered in God's house, Scripture leaves no doubt women were forbidden to go past the outer court of the Tabernacle. The ministering women were only allowed at the entrance to the tent of meeting, while the bronze basin was located next to the altar and, therefore, off limits to them. They would never use it. Maybe they would never even see it.

In Exodus 30:17-21, the Lord gave Moses instructions about the usage of the bronze basin. "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... they shall wash with water, so that they may not die."

The bronze altar and basin were deeply significant as symbols of blood atonement and purification, foreshadowing the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Specific instructions were given to Moses, stating the priests were to first offer a blood sacrifice at the bronze altar for the forgiveness of sins. As we know, this repetitive shedding of blood pointed to the once and for all sacrifice of the spotless Lamb of God.

After the sacrifice, the priests were to proceed to the bronze basin made from the women's mirrors. It was here they were to wash their hands and feet before entering into the presence of God. They could not come before a holy God with any impurity. This ritual symbolized the ongoing sanctification of those who had been forgiven, and God was very serious about it, stating they were to observe this ritual "that they may not die."

Even though the women themselves would never wash in the basin, they understood their sins would also be forgiven through the sacrifices and ritual cleansing of the priests. Their fear of the Lord and belief in His commands moved them to willingly give their precious items to make the tabernacle furnishings. They had a deep reverence and appreciation for the work the priests did on their behalf. They understood that unlike physical appearance, spiritual cleansing was only made possible by what took place at the altar and in the Holy Place.

Barbara Latta, a contributing author to Crosswalk, wrote: "Relinquishing their mirrors could have been a freewill offering from these women out of devotion to the Lord to signify giving up their desire to look at themselves and instead to now look unto their Deliverer."

All One in Christ

The study of this obscure little verse about the "ministering women" is so rich in nuance for us today. One of the things we can't help but notice is the contrast between the old and new covenants. The bronze altar became obsolete because of Jesus's sacrifice for us on the cross. By the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we no longer ritualistically use holy water to purify ourselves from sin. And through His death and resurrection for all who believe, the thick curtain separating us from the holiest part of the Tabernacle has been torn apart.

In Galatians 3:28-29, we rejoice to read: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave

nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

As women under the New Covenant, we need not stay outside the gates longing to be allowed inside. We may enter boldly into the very throne room of our Maker, every bit as much "Abraham's offspring" and "heirs according to promise" as our brothers in Christ.

Even though they lived and served many years ago and in a completely different culture, our ancient Hebrew sisters still challenge us today. Their mention, though brief, speaks volumes to us about motives, selfless service, and stewardship of our possessions. How do we measure up to their example?

For Discussion

1. What are your treasured possessions?

Wealthy or not, we all have them. What is the thing that you would run back into your burning house to retrieve? Whether of sentimental or intrinsic value, we can all think of things that we would be heartbroken to lose.

If God required it of you as an act of worship, would you be willing to sacrifice that item for Him?

2. Read Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Is it easier for you to spend money on yourself or others? Does \$50 seem more significant when you consider giving it as an offering?

Are you eager to give to others even when you will get nothing in return?

3. Do you have a skill or talent to offer the Lord? In Exodus 35, we read about "all the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill." Take inventory of your talents and abilities and make them available to your church, local ministry, or community.

About the Writer:

Ruth McDonald has served as the Director of FWB Women's Ministries since November 2022. She comes to this position after 38 years of ministry with her husband Donnie as a missionary with IM, Inc. (Free Will Baptist International Mission) in Japan. Born to church planters in the Pacific Northwest, Ruth has also lived in Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Arizona, South Carolina... and, of course, Japan. During her years in Japan, Ruth actively participated in church planting, music, children's ministry, evangelism, and discipleship. Ruth's passion is for encouraging women in their faith through writing, speaking, and counseling. Donnie and Ruth have four young adult children and four grandchildren. Her family describes her as "crazy, fun-loving, talkative, and passionate." W

