

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 20: The Priesthood and Holy Garments -- Exodus 28:1-29:46

Imagine standing in the camp of Israel on the morning Aaron first walked toward the tabernacle. He is not wearing his everyday robe. He is dressed in something woven by hands God had filled with skill: a blue robe edged with golden bells and pomegranates, an apron of gold and blue and purple and scarlet, a breastpiece set with twelve glittering stones, and across his forehead a plate of pure gold engraved with three words, Holy to the LORD. The crowd grows quiet. This man is about to do what none of them dares to do. He is going to draw near to God on their behalf. Exodus 28 and 29 are the story of how a sinner was made fit to stand in the presence of a holy God, and why every detail of it should make your heart ache for someone better.

Look closely at what Aaron carried. On each shoulder was an onyx stone engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, six names on the right, six on the left. Over his heart, in the breastpiece, the same twelve names blazed in twelve precious stones. When he went in, he carried the whole nation with him, on his strong shoulders and over his beating heart, into the presence of God. He did not go in alone. He went in for them, with them, as them. And God said it was 'for a memorial before the LORD continually.' Picture that. You belong to a people whom God will not forget, because their names are written where the priest cannot lay them down.

But notice what it took to put Aaron in those garments. He had to be washed with water. He had to be anointed with oil. A bull had to die, and Aaron laid his hands on its head. Two rams had to die, and their blood was put on the priest's ear and thumb and toe, then sprinkled on him and his sons. For seven days this went on, sacrifice after sacrifice, blood after blood, until the man who would represent Israel before God was himself declared holy. Even the priest needed atonement. Even the mediator had to be cleansed. The very glory of those garments could not hide the fact that the man inside them was a sinner like the rest.

And that is exactly why these chapters point past Aaron to Another. Hebrews tells us there came a Priest who needed no bull or ram for His own sins, who entered not a tent but heaven itself, who offered not the blood of animals but His own blood once for all, and who lives forever to carry your name before the Father. Aaron's robe wore out; Aaron died; another priest had to take his place. But Jesus, our great High Priest, holds His office permanently because He continues forever. So read Exodus 28 and 29 slowly, and let every stone and bell and drop of blood teach you to look up to the One who now bears your name over His heart and never sets it down.

Group Discussion: The high priest bore the names of the twelve tribes engraved on stones upon his shoulders and over his heart, and carried them into God's presence as a memorial. What does this picture teach us about how God relates to His people, and how does it find its fullness in Christ, who 'always lives to make intercession' for us (Hebrews 7:25)?

Personal Reflection: Aaron had to be washed, anointed, and atoned for before he could serve, because even the mediator was a sinner. Where in your life are you tempted to think your service to God rests on your own worthiness rather than on the cleansing and standing Christ has given you?

Read Exodus 28:1–29:46

Study Questions

1. Read 28:1–5. God set apart Aaron and his sons ‘to serve me as priests,’ and called for holy garments ‘for glory and for beauty.’ What does the very existence of an appointed priesthood teach us about the gulf between a holy God and a sinful people, and about how that gulf is to be bridged?
2. Read 28:2–3. The garments were made by those whom God had ‘filled with a spirit of skill.’ The priest did not invent his own clothing or appoint himself; everything came from God’s design and calling. Where are you tempted to take to yourself a standing before God that He alone can give, and what would it mean to receive your place from Him instead?
3. Read 28:9–12. The names of the twelve tribes were engraved on two onyx stones set on the high priest’s shoulders, that he might ‘bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance.’ What does it reveal about God that He wanted His people carried, by name, into His presence?
4. Read 28:29. Aaron also bore the names over his heart, in the breastpiece, ‘to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD.’ Carried on the shoulders speaks of strength; carried over the heart speaks of love. How does it change the way you walk through this week to know that Christ carries you in both His strength and His love before the Father?

5. Read 28:30 and 28:36–38. God gave the Urim and Thummim for seeking His will, and set on the turban a gold plate, 'Holy to the LORD,' so that Aaron might 'bear any guilt from the holy things' that the people's offerings 'may be accepted.' What do these two provisions, guidance and accepted worship, teach us about a God who makes a way for sinners to know Him and to be received by Him?
6. Read 28:38 again. Even Israel's holy gifts carried guilt that had to be borne by the priest before they could be accepted. What does this say about the imperfection clinging even to your best offerings to God, and how does it drive you to rest in a Mediator who makes you and your worship acceptable?
7. Read 29:1–9. Before Aaron could serve, he had to be washed with water, clothed in the holy garments, and anointed with oil. What does this ordination process teach about the truth that no one is fit to draw near to God on his own, but must be cleansed, clothed, and set apart by God Himself?
8. Read 29:4–7. Washing, robing, anointing: God Himself prepared and consecrated the priest. When you are tempted to feel disqualified, unclean, or unfit to come before God, how does it steady you to remember that your fitness to draw near is something God provides in Christ and not something you manufacture?
9. Read 29:10–21 with Hebrews 7:23–28 and 10:1–14. Aaron's ordination required a bull and two rams, blood applied and sprinkled, repeated year after year, because the old priests 'were prevented by death from continuing in office' and their sacrifices could 'never take away sins.' How does the Aaronic priesthood, with its endless blood and dying priests, point us to Christ our great High Priest, who offered Himself once for all and lives forever, and why must we not reinstate this priesthood today?

10. Read 29:42–46, where God promises, ‘I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God,’ and look back across these two chapters. Naming the priesthood, the garments, the names borne on heart and shoulder, the washing and anointing and atoning blood, all of it fulfilled in Christ, name one specific way the Lord Jesus, your great High Priest, is forming you to draw near to God with confidence and to live as one He carries and intercedes for.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 7:23–28, the old priests were many because death stopped them, but Jesus holds His priesthood permanently and saves to the uttermost, always living to intercede; Hebrews 4:14–16, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, let us hold fast and draw near with confidence to the throne of grace; Hebrews 9:11–14, Christ entered the greater tent by His own blood, securing eternal redemption and purifying the conscience; Hebrews 10:1–14, the law’s repeated sacrifices could never take away sins, but by a single offering Christ has perfected for all time those being sanctified; 1 Peter 2:5–9, you are a holy and royal priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ

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