

Sermon 98, The Priesthood, Exodus 27:20-28:43

Proposition: God called priests to serve Him by taking away sin and making acceptable sacrifices in special robes that highlight the glory of God and the glory of priesthood.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have spent a lot of time talking about the Kingdom of God. I think you know — at least, I have told you hundreds of times — that the Kingdom is the reign of Christ which is rescuing people from the kingdom of darkness and bringing them into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son. We have talked a lot about Jesus as the King to whom we need to submit and whose rule we need to obey. We have talked a lot less about His office as a priest, in which capacity He offered Himself as a sacrifice to God and makes continual intercession for us. But the priesthood of Christ is incredibly important; indeed, it is every bit as much at the heart of Scripture as His Kingship. We need a King to rule us, but we also need a priest to save us and represent us before God. In Christ, we have such a priest. That, in turn, should motivate us to study the pre-history of priesthood. What was priesthood like before Christ? Because the answer to that question, in turn, will tell us more about what our great High Priest is like. We will see that a priest is a man called by God to represent the people to God, and the priest is fitted for the presence of God by the special robes of holiness which he wears.

I. The Task of a Priest

We begin, then, by looking at the half-dozen tasks of a priest that are set out in the passage before us. There are more, and indeed, this passage does not elaborate on the granddaddy of all priestly tasks, which is to offer sacrifice. And thus, the sermon should maybe be titled “some aspects of priesthood” rather than “the priesthood.” But though we will not directly discuss sacrifice today, it lurks in the background of many of the priest’s tasks.

A. To Maintain the Light of God’s Presence, 27:20-21

The LORD introduces the section on priesthood by speaking of keeping the light kindled. This is the Menorah described in the previous chapter; keeping it lit, with the light representing the presence of the Light of the World, was one major task of the priesthood. If we zoom out and look at the bigger picture once more, we will see that we are in a section about the Tabernacle, which is the tent in which God would dwell with His people. The priests are the religious functionaries who keep God resident. It is their job to ensure that He is able to remain with His people. The text will talk about some of the ways in which they actually do that. But as you read over the seemingly endless (though actually not very long) descriptions of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, remember that the point is not the fabric, but the presence of God dwelling with His people. The priests are there to make that happen. And so whatever you read about them, relate it back to this central goal: Priests maintain the presence of God with His people. That is what the lit Menorah symbolizes — the light of God. The lights are on and Somebody’s home.

B. To Serve Yahweh, 28:1

The text goes on to say that the priests are to “minister as priest to Me.” The service of the priests is directed toward Yahweh. Priestly work is not primarily work for human beings. Yes, Moses and Malachi both say that the lips of a priest should keep knowledge — i.e., that teaching is one of the functions of Israelite priests. But teaching the people of God is not the primary calling of a priest. He is first and foremost doing things for God.

We have a hard time getting our minds around this concept in our human-centered age. Someone employed just to do things for God? But God doesn’t need anything! Nonetheless, He had servants who took care of His home and, above all, represented Israel in His presence.

C. To Represent Israel Before Yahweh, 28:9-12, 15-21, 29-30

The lion’s share of this chapter is about two things: The high priest’s clothing, and the stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes that the high priest wore before Yahweh. Thus, “Aaron shall bear their names [the names of the twelve tribes] before the LORD on his two shoulders for a memorial” (Exo 28:12). A few verses later, the text speaks also of the stones being borne on Aaron’s chest as well as on his shoulders. Both the two shoulder stones and the twelve chest stones contain the names of the tribes of Israel. Lest you missed the point of this, the text repeats it toward the end of the chapter.

1. For a Memorial, 28:29

First, it says that the stones are over Aaron’s heart for a memorial. They are something that Yahweh can see, a reminder of His people. In Isaiah He says that our walls are continually before

Him. He looks on our houses, because He loves us. Well, because He loved Israel He had Aaron constantly reminding Him about Israel's name. God won't and can't forget, of course. He doesn't need a reminder. But He nonetheless created an entire institutional structure dedicated to ensuring that He would be consistently reminded of His people, the twelve tribes, the whole mass of His beloved ones.

That's how much God cares about us. Though He would never forget us, He creates this reminder so that we know that He is watching, that He looks on us, that He remembers who we are. As we saw a few weeks ago, Israel as a whole cannot come physically into the presence of God — so Israel comes into His presence symbolically, with their names written twice on the high priest. What a reminder!

2. For a Judgment, 28:30

The other thing the text says about this work of the high priest bringing Israel's names into God's presence is that it is “the judgment of the sons of Israel before Yahweh continually.” This word “judgment” is the same one used in ch. 21, “these are the judgments you shall set before them.” It refers most often to God's binding judicial decisions, understood as something like case law. Some translations, such as the NIV, relate this “judgment” to the Urim and Thummim in the breastpiece of judgment such that the text is only saying that “Aaron will carry the means to make decisions for the Israelites over his heart when in the LORD's presence at all times” (Exo 28:30 CEB). Needless to say, this seems a little odd. Why would the LORD need to see the means of Israel's decision-making in His presence? Taking the means of making decisions for the LORD to see is a little like carrying coal to Newcastle. It's providing the LORD with something He already has in spades. Rather, brothers and sisters, we should understand that this breastpiece of judgment is a reminder to the LORD of His judgment regarding Israel — viz., that they are His people whom He saved from Egypt and that they are His treasured possession above all peoples. That is what Aaron continually carried before the LORD. A judgment is a law, a final decision which continues to be applicable into the future. And that is what Aaron carried on his chest: God's decision that Israel is His special possession above all peoples.

In New Testament terms, a priest continually intercedes for God's people. In the OT, rather than being carried on verbally, this intercession was carried on quietly, simply by carrying the names of the children of Israel and the breastpiece of judgment that said to God, “You have decided to make this people your special treasure above all families of the earth.”

That's what the priest did.

D. To Be Holy, 28:36

But his task didn't end there. Far from it. He had the task of being holy. He carried a label that literally said “Holiness to Yahweh.” His purpose was to serve Yahweh. He was separated from common use to the special purpose of serving God. The text tells us that this plate was what enabled the priest to do the part of his job relating to sacrifice. Without being holy, he couldn't be priest. Without being separated from common usage for the special purpose of serving God and maintaining the divine presence with Israel, he could not do the next two things listed, which are arguably the most important things on the list:

E. To Bear the Iniquity of Israel's Offerings, 28:38

The first of these was to take away the iniquity of Israel's offerings. The things that Israel gave to God were tainted with sin. In OT usage, sin cannot simply be dissolved or washed off. It has to be carried away. That is exactly what Aaron did — he picked up the sin and carried it away. He bore the iniquity from the sacrifices and gifts of Israel.

F. To Render Israel's Offerings Acceptable to Yahweh, 28:38

The result of this was to render all the holy things consecrated by the sons of Israel, whether as gifts to the tabernacle establishment or offerings made directly to Yahweh, accepted before Yahweh. "Holiness, without which no man shall see the LORD," says Hebrews — but Exodus further informs us that not only no man, but no sacrifice and no gift can be accepted which is not made holy by the holiness of a properly sanctified priest.

Israel's offerings wouldn't go through without a priest. They would "bounce off the ceiling." They would be rejected, like Cain's offering. Only a priest could get Israel in touch with God; only a priest could allow Israel to present offerings clean of iniquity.

II. The Calling of a Priest

The chapter begins with the calling of a priest. Where did these priests come from? After all, Genesis and Exodus speak of the patriarchs and young men offering sacrifices. Were they priests? I don't think so. They did some priestly functions, but being a priest is a full-time job, a calling from the Lord.

A. Priests Don't Select or Ordain Themselves, 28:1

That's why the chapter begins with a direct calling to Moses — not a "you shall make," or "he shall make," but a "as for you, bring near to yourself." Moses is the agent who makes the priests who will sustain the presence of God with His people.

The Hebrew writer picks up on this. Again, the point is clear: You don't make yourself a priest. God selects priests.

B. Priests Are Brought Near by God, 28:1

And the term for this is "bring near." God brings near priests to Himself. A priest comes into the presence of God — that's what a priest does. But the priest is really, at the same time, brought near by God.

III. The Robes of a Priest

The priest is also clothed by God — clothed with salvation, as the Psalms say. The bulk of this chapter describes what the priests wore as they ministered. I want to pick out five characteristics, with the understanding that these characteristics of the clothing also apply ideally to every priest, and above all to our great High Priest.

A. Priestly Robes Are Holy

The first, and most important, is that the robes are holy. The root "kodesh," *holy*, appears 11 times in our chapter. Clearly, the holiness of these robes is incredibly important — which further implies that the holiness of priests in general, and our great high priest in particular, is of the essence of their ministry. A profane priest is a contradiction in terms. The priest's entire life is set apart to the service of Yahweh, symbolized elsewhere by regulations about his marriage, his

dealings with death, and his food. Another side of this holiness is moral purity. To be set apart to Yahweh requires that you do everything He commands. You don't exist for Him if you live for pleasure, or for revenge, or for any other low and dishonorable passion.

B. Priestly Robes Are Glorious

Furthermore, brothers and sisters, priestly robes are glorious. The robes make him appear weighty; they give him grandeur and splendor. They are dignified, but beyond dignified. Our society believes in glamor, and in camp, but we hardly even try to find the glorious, except perhaps in our cinematography. Priestly robes, though, are glorious — and our high priest is full of glory, for He is the brightness of the Father's glory.

C. Priestly Robes Are Beautiful

The robes also give beauty to the priest. They are attractive and desirable. They are magnificent and honorable. And so is our savior.

D. Priestly Robes Match the Tabernacle

The robes are also made of blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twined linen — the same materials from which the tabernacle was made. The priest matches the divine dwelling place. He fits. In fact, when it comes to Christ, we can see that He is the tabernacle, the true temple which the Lord set up. God dwells in the tabernacle, and also with the priest.

E. Priestly Robes Are Necessary, v. 43

Finally, priestly robes are necessary. To approach God without being clothed in this glorious, beautiful garb is to bear your guilt and die. You cannot approach, cannot be priest, without the right clothing. That's because the Levitical priesthood is derivative. These priests are priests by an extrinsic power, the power of clothing. But our great high priest is priest by an intrinsic power, the power of an indestructible life.

Brothers and sisters, do you love and admire the great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God? Do you see Him in this description of the Aaronic priesthood? And do you see how superior He is to this priesthood? Go to Him to love and heal you, to bring you into God's presence and keep you there. Amen.