

Our Great High Priest – Exodus 28

The tabernacle is where the people of God transacted their spiritual business. It was the place they brought their thank offerings, made atonement for their sins, and entered the presence of the living God. But they didn't do these things on their own. The tabernacle wasn't self-service. Rather, its sacred duties were performed by holy men with a holy calling. These men served in the tabernacle as priests before God. Theirs was the high privilege of entering the Holy Place where God was.

Up to this point in Exodus, God has said relatively little about the priests and their duties. First, he told Moses how he wanted the tabernacle constructed, and only then did he explain what was supposed to happen inside. But we already have a good idea what the priests did from the way the tabernacle was furnished.

The priests made holy bread and put it on the table of showbread, they offered sacrifices on the altar, they took care of the sacred objects used to pour drink offerings, sprinkled sacrificial blood, tended the fire on the altar, and kept the lights burning on the golden lampstand. In addition, the priests took down, carried, and set up the tabernacle whenever God and his people were on the move.

The High Priest and His Garments

Before explaining the rest of the priestly duties, God told Moses who should serve. He said, **1 “Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron’s sons Nadab (Nay-Dab), and Abihu (A-bye-hu), Eleazar and Ithamar (Ith-a-mar).**

If you recall, Aaron was Moses' brother. He had been a leader in Israel since Moses first told Pharaoh to let God's people go. Aaron had served as Moses' spokesman. Now God was calling Aaron and his sons to serve as priests in his holy tabernacle. Consequently, Aaron became the father of the priesthood, the first in a long line of priests before God.

It's significant that Aaron and his sons didn't claim this office for themselves because their calling came from God. There was no such thing as a self-appointed priest. The same principle holds true in the church today. There are no self-appointed pastors, elders, or deacons. When God calls someone to public service in the church, he gives an inward sense of the calling. If the call to sacred ministry really comes from God, then it will also come through those who hold spiritual authority in the church.

2 “And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. 3 You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron’s garments to consecrate him for my priesthood. 4 These are the garments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a coat of checker work, a turban and a sash. They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests. 5 They shall receive gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen.

These articles of clothing are described more fully later in Exodus. They were carefully made by men with a God-given gift for craftsmanship. First came the breastpiece, adorned with gemstones, which went over the high priest’s chest. This was attached to the ephod—a long, sleeveless vest something like an apron. The ephod was suspended by shoulder straps, almost like overalls, and tied around the priest’s waist with a belt. These were Aaron’s outer garments. Underneath he wore a robe, a tunic, and linen underclothes. To top it all off, he had a turban for his head.

These were the ceremonial robes the high priest wore as he performed the sacred duties of his office. The Bible uses three key words to describe his garments: “holy,” “glory,” and “beauty.” These clothes were sacred or set apart. Obviously, they were not for everyday use. These clothes were set apart for sacred duty: holy clothes for a holy calling. What the high priest wore showed that what he did was holy before God.

The high-priestly garments were also glorious and beautiful. There was something glorious about the high priest’s calling, and this was displayed by the grandeur of his clothes. Lastly, the high-priestly garments were beautiful. They were designed with an obvious appreciation for fashion and style. The high priest was the best-dressed man in Israel. His robes were made of pure white linen, decorated with colorful yarn in gold, blue, purple, and scarlet.

These happened to be the same colors used in making the tabernacle. What the high priest wore, therefore, was made of the same material. It was almost as if the high priest embodied the tabernacle. The priest and the tabernacle both pointed to God. The words used to describe the high-priestly garments could just as well be used to describe God’s divine nature.

The Ephod

The grandeur of these garments was important not only for the high priest but also for the nation of Israel. Whenever the priest performed his sacred duties, he represented God’s people. He didn’t act for himself alone, but for all the people before God. What he wore, therefore, was as important to them as it was to him.

The priests’ role as representative was symbolized by the ephod. Here is how God described it:

6 “And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and of fine twined linen, skillfully worked. 7 It shall have two shoulder pieces attached to its two edges, so that it may be joined together. 8 And the skillfully woven band on it shall be made like it and be of one piece with it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen.”

Like everything else in the tabernacle, the ephod was made of fine linen adorned with richly colored thread. It seems to have been a long, sleeveless apron or vest, with two straps or suspenders that went over the priest’s shoulders. God gave Moses special instructions for putting these together:

9 “You shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, 10 six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. 11 As a jeweler engraves signets, so shall you engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel. You shall enclose them in settings of gold filigree. 12 And you shall set the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel. And Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for remembrance. 13 You shall make settings of gold filigree, 14 and two chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; and you shall attach the corded chains to the settings. “

To finish the ephod, craftsmen took two semiprecious stones and mounted them in ornate settings made with golden wire. The stones were then attached to the shoulder pieces of the ephod. Two chains of golden braid hung down like ropes, presumably to hold up the breastpiece.

The most important thing about the ephod was what was written on it. Inscribed on the two stones were twelve names. These were names of the sons of Jacob, later called Israel. These were the twelve tribes of Israel.

Consider the spiritual significance of these inscriptions. When the high priest entered that Holy Place, he wore the tribal names of Israel on his shoulders. This showed that the high priest represented the people before God.

Whenever the high priest put on his ceremonial robes, he lifted the people onto his shoulders and carried them into the presence of God. Back at Mount Sinai, God had said, **5 “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 9:5-6a)**. These great spiritual realities were symbolically reenacted every time the high priest went before God. His clothes made a fashion statement. They said, “Here we are, Lord, all twelve tribes of us—your precious kingdom of priests.” As Aaron continued to offer the sacrifices of the people, he was carrying Israel on his

shoulders, representing the people before God. Through the priestly act of this one man, atonement was made for all the sin of God's people.

Our Great High Priest

There was only one problem with this arrangement. The high priest himself was a sinner. No matter how magnificent his clothes were—how holy, glorious, or beautiful they were—they couldn't hide the sin in his heart. The clothes didn't make the man. So, the sacrifices the high priest offered were neither perfect nor permanent. He had to keep going back into the tabernacle over and over to make atonement, both for his own sin and for the sins of God's people.

To enter the glorious presence of God requires perfect holiness, and the high priest didn't have it. The stories in the Bible prove this repeatedly. None of Israel's high priests ever lived up to God's standard. Aaron sinned by leading the people in false worship: He made the golden calf. His sons Nadab and Abihu sinned by offering unholy fire on God's altar; for that they were destroyed (Leviticus 10:1-2). Eli sinned by failing to discipline his sons. They were also priests, but they were such wicked men that God struck them both down on the same day (1 Samuel 2:12-25).

As we read on through the prophets, we discover that as much as anything else, it was the corruption of the priests that led Israel into exile. Eventually the priesthood broke down altogether. From the book of Hosea, we learn that **“the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods” (Hosea 3:4)**. This was a chilling prophecy. It meant that when the people of God fell under judgment, they would live without a royal king or a holy priest. There would be no one to wear the ephod, no one to bear the tribal names as a memorial before God, and no one to offer a sacrifice for their sins—and this went on for centuries.

God's people needed a perfect priest. They needed a holy priest who was uncorrupted by his own sin. They needed a glorious priest who would shine forever in God's light. They needed a beautiful priest who would offer his pure life to God. In a word, they needed Jesus, because the great message of the gospel is that God has provided the perfect priest in the person of his own Son.

Seeing this helps us understand how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together. Theologians have long recognized that there were three main offices in Old Testament Israel: prophet, priest, and king. The prophet was the man who spoke God's word. The priest was the man who went into God's presence to make atonement for sin. The king was the man who ruled with God's authority.

All three of these offices were vitally important to the success of the nation. God's people flourished whenever they had faithful prophets, holy priests, and godly kings. Unfortunately, this didn't happen very often. Usually, a faithful prophet had to deal with an ungodly king, or the authority of a godly king was undermined by an immoral priesthood. The results were always disastrous. Again, and again the Old Testament confronts us with Israel's desperate need for these offices to come together. God finally supplied the need by sending his Son to do the work of all three offices. God sent Jesus Christ to be our faithful prophet, holy priest, and godly king. The more we learn about these three offices from the Old Testament, the more clearly, we understand the person and work of Christ.

We learn about Christ's priestly ministry by studying the tabernacle. Whatever the high priest did for Israel in that holy place, Jesus has done for us in heaven itself. This is the main argument of the book of Hebrews, which says, **"We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God" (4:14)**. But in order for Jesus to serve as our high priest, he had to meet the qualifications. He had to be able to enter God's glorious presence in the beauty of holiness.

In the Old Testament the high priest made himself presentable by wearing special clothes—"holy garments...for glory and for beauty". Unfortunately, the inward reality of the priest's life never matched the outward splendor of his appearance. Enter Jesus Christ. The writer to the Hebrews asks, **"Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood ...what further need would there have been for another priest to arise?" (7:11)**. The obvious answer is that perfection could not be attained through Israel's priesthood; it could only come through a greater priest. So, the Scripture goes on to say, concerning Jesus and his priestly ministry:

"For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weaknesses as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. (Hebrews 7:26-28)

Jesus is a priest without sin. He is holiness incarnate—perfectly righteous in his own person. He's also glorious. As the Scripture says, **"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3)**. Jesus is pristine in his holiness, magnificent in his glory, and exalted in his beauty.

This means that when he performed the great work of his priesthood—which as we all know was to offer himself as the sacrifice for our sins by dying on the cross—he didn't need to wear any of the high priest's clothes. He didn't wear the ephod. He didn't have precious stones on

his shoulders or a breastpiece over his chest. He didn't wear the robe or the tunic, the turban or the sash. Jesus didn't wear any of these things but suffered for our sins in naked glory. He didn't need any outward splendor but had a splendor all his own. It was the glorious holiness of his own beautiful person that made his offering acceptable unto God. And when God the Father saw Jesus making atonement for sin, he said, **"Now here is a sacrifice that will pay for sin once and for all. The priest who offers it is perfectly holy, without any spot or blemish of sin. And he is more beautiful than anything in all creation because he shines with the glory of my own divine nature. This great high priest is my own beloved Son."**

Now here's the amazing thing: This is not simply how the father looks at his Son but how he views everyone who trusts in his Son, because Jesus is our great High Priest before God. The truth is that God has promised to accept anyone and everyone who comes to him in the name of Jesus Christ.

When he died on the cross, Jesus was carrying us on his shoulders, taking our sin upon himself in order to deal with it in the presence of God. Our names have been written on God incarnate, for as God said through the prophet Isaiah, **"Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:16a)**. And Jesus stands as our representative before God to this very day. To quote again from the book of Hebrews, **"Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man" (8:1-2)**.

The tabernacle was the place of God's presence. Now the true tabernacle is in Heaven—the place where God is. And our great High Priest is in the tabernacle. Just as the Israelites looked to their high priest, so we look to Jesus: **"Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession" (Hebrews 3:1)**. And as we look to Jesus, in all the beauty of his holiness, we find the assurance of our salvation. We know that just as God has accepted our great High Priest, so he will accept us: **"We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf" (Hebrews 6:19-20a)**. Amen.

Questions

1. Did you dress up for church when you were younger? Do you still? Why or why not?
2. The Bible does not say exactly how the Urim and Thummim functioned to reveal decisions from God. Nonetheless, we know from other places in the Bible that drawing straws and casting lots (think throwing dice) were ways to receive a decision from God. Here is what biblestudy.org has to say: “The primary reason for casting lots was to render an impartial, unbiased decision on important matters. Once the lot was cast, no one could argue that the decision was the result of human intervention like nepotism, politics, favoritism, and so on.” Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but it’s every decision is from the Lord.” When was the last time you made a decision this way? Do you think God still intends for us to use this method today for making important decisions? Remember that people had always prayed for God’s wisdom in decision-making throughout the entire OT and NT, and yet they still cast lots for some big decisions, like who would replace Judas Iscariot.
3. Is there a Biblical significance today to the use of priests and pastors in a worship service beyond simply tradition?
4. Bonus question: Is it true that the actress Uma Thurman was named after the Urim and the Thummim?