

The Beauty of Holiness

Exodus 28:1-45

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From Exodus 24 on, we've said several times the focus is on the details of the worship of God. Exodus 24 is the great turning point of the book. It's the "swing chapter" or dividing point of the Book of Exodus, and we commented even as we launched into Exodus 25, that it is striking that that passage begins a thirteen-chapter account of the tabernacle. Think of it: nearly a third of the Book of Exodus deals with this wilderness-portable sanctuary, and that sheer volume of attention on the tabernacle shows us something about the importance of the worship of God. Exodus 25-31 contain the message that God gave to Moses on the mountain during some portion of that forty-day time that he was up on the mountain receiving the revelation of God; and that passage, that section of Exodus, focuses on the form of worship that is to provide the vehicle for the people of God's divine encounter with Him.

Exodus 25, even as it describes the sanctuary, the tabernacle itself, and the furnishings of that tabernacle, supplies for us various spiritual principles of true worship. It speaks about willing worship: that people are to willingly or voluntarily (not under compulsion) bring their gifts for the construction of that sanctuary. It is a very costly sanctuary. Though the gifts are brought freely, very expensive materials are used to build the sanctuary, and so we learn something about willing worship and costly worship from the passage.

We see as well that worship is consciously dependent upon God's condescension, and that, above all, worship appreciates God's desire for communion with His people and sees that very communion as the great end of life.

Now, we looked at Exodus 26 a few weeks ago, and we saw that it gives us a detailed treatment of curtains. And in the first part of that chapter, from Exodus 26:1-14, we saw the description of the various coverings of the tabernacle, and then in verses 15-20 of that chapter we saw something about the wooden structure (or frame) of the tabernacle, and then the inner and outer veils are described in verses 31-37.

We learned a little about the altar and the court of the tabernacle, as we looked

at Exodus 27, and that brings us to Exodus 28, which focuses on the special clothing which God authorizes for the high priest and for the priests.

Look at the passage briefly and let me point to seven parts of this chapter — seven parts, I might hasten to say, that we will not have time to look at in detail...we'll draw some general lessons...but if you look at verse 1, you'll see Aaron and his sons being called by God and set apart for the priestly office. Then, if you look at verses 2-4, you will see a second section to the chapter, where the holy garments for their ministry in the tabernacle are appointed by God, and explained and outlined; then, in verses 5-14, you'll see a third part of the chapter where extensive instructions are made or given for the making of this ephod—this kilt, or waistcoat, or whatever it is that's to be worn along with the girdle by the high priest.

Fourthly, in verses 15-20 we find details on the design of the breastplate that is to be worn by the high priest, as well as the mysterious Urim and Thummin. And then, fifthly, in verses 31-35, we get further specifications on the robe that is to be worn along with the ephod “with woven pomegranates and bells.”

And then, sixthly, in verses 36-39, we have a description of the gold plate to be worn on the turban of the high priest described in connection with the tunic and the embroidered coat; and then seventh and finally, in verses 40-43, the attention turns away from these specific garments of the high priest to the instructions or directions for the garments of Aaron's sons — that is, the ordinary priesthood.

With that as a little bit of introduction, let's turn to God's word here in Exodus 28.

[*Scripture reading: Ex. 28:1-43*]

Amen. This is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord, as we come to consider Your word, we ask that by Your Spirit we would behold wonderful things in Your law. Speak to us of our worship in spirit and truth, even as we study the worship of the tabernacle; and enlighten the eyes of our hearts and draw us into fellowship with You by the grace of You Holy Spirit, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, the minutiae of this passage may lull a reader into thinking that nothing of great importance is being recorded; or, the minutiae may be so overwhelming to you that it tempts you to resort to reading this passage with some sort of allegory in order to find useful truth and application of it. But several obvious features stand out in this passage, especially when this passage is read in light of the Book of Hebrews and the Book of Revelation, and the rest of the New Testament, and I want to bring to your attention several important practical theological truths and truths about worship which are derived from these sartorial liturgical instructions. Let's look at some of these principles that we can gather

right away.

First of all, just from the general detail of the instructions seen in verses 1-43, we can make this observation: The intricate detail of God's instructions indicate at least one thing about our worship of God: it's important. God takes His worship very seriously, and this is apparent from the sheer detail of the instructions in this passage. The great care and specificity of this relatively minor matter of the high priestly and priestly garments shows us that God takes worship very seriously. He even orders directions regarding the underwear that is to be worn by the priests (verse 43)! Did you notice that? It is such an awesome and privileged thing to come into His presence that every divine detail must be attended to. No Old Testament saint—no Old Testament saint—could ever have pondered this passage and been left with the impression that God could be approached casually...that it was OK to be irreverent in the presence of God.

No, this passage stresses that God must be approached on His own terms. Meeting with God, drawing near to God, communing with God, is an awesome thing that requires obedience to His revealed will, and that is an important lesson for those of us who live in a casual way, where we're more concerned with our own comfort and our own personal preferences - and those things often dictate more about our mode of worship than does God's word. We do well to consider this truth.

In the Law of Moses, communion with God, intimacy with God, was seen as an awesome and a mysterious thing that required divinely directed spiritual preparations and the highest level of solemnity. David Peterson, in his interesting book, *Engaging with God*, gives a definition of worship. He catches something of this point when he says:

“Worship is an engagement with God on the terms He proposes, and in the way He alone makes possible.”

Notice three components to that definition.

Worship is engaging with God. It's meeting with God. It's not only giving to Him the glory due His name, but it is receiving the blessing of communion with Him. It is done only on the terms that He proposes. He tells us how to approach Him. He tells us the way to approach Him, and, thirdly, He alone makes it possible for us to approach Him. So Peterson's definition catches beautifully some of the emphases of Exodus 25-31.

So there's the first point: The sheer detail of this passage lets us know that the worship of God is important.

Secondly, if you'll concentrate on verses 2-4, and then verses 40-43, we'll get another general observation from these passages. The instructions about

clothing for the high priest and the priests indicate that God wants those that serve Him to be set apart. The priests are to be clothed in holiness to minister to God, and we, too, must worship Him in the beauty of holiness.

In verses 2-4, the purpose of these holy garments is made clear. They are in the first place holy garments in the sense that they are set apart from common clothing. They are expensive; they are ornate; they are exceedingly handsome. Among other things, God wanted tabernacle worship to reflect His glory and beauty, and that very phrase *for glory and beauty* is repeated in the Psalms, but it is always attached to God in the Psalms, and not to the priests and not to the high priests. And so, He wants the tabernacle worship to reflect something of His glory and beauty.

But further, the purpose of Aaron's holy clothing is explicitly indicated. Look at verse 3. It is for the purpose "that he may minister as priest to Me." It is to set him apart for that distinctive function of ministering as high priest, as representative of the people of God in the Holy of Holies. This same point, by the way, is made in verses 40-43, in talking about the priests. They're to wear their distinctive clothing "so that they may minister to the Lord." And in fact, if you look at verse 43, it's even threatened that should they not follow this instruction, they themselves will be struck down. God is so serious about approaching Him in consecration and holiness.

Have you noticed? The high priest has eight distinctive garments that are to be worn. The regular priests have four distinctive garments. No shoes are mentioned. That's because they minister before the Lord barefoot. When they were ministering before the Lord in the tabernacle, they were on holy ground. What did Moses do when he came before the burning bush and the presence of the Lord? He took off his shoes because he was on holy ground.

And this high priest's outfit described for us in outline in verses 2-4, and then in detail in the rest of the chapter, would have been absolutely stunning! We have a description of the high priest's garment as late as about two centuries before Jesus Christ, and it comes from the author, in *Ben Sira 1*, and he gives this stunning description of the beauty of the high priest's garment. It's interesting, isn't it? After you think about the high priest's garment, and then you look at the description of the regular priests' garment, their clothing would have been relatively simple compared to his clothing. They were clothed in white linen, but he was clothed all in white linen and gold. It would have been an extraordinary picture, and the clothing itself is symbolic of the fact that God has set apart this high priest to serve in the holiest place. Isn't it interesting that he wears the same material that decorates the interior of the Holy of Holies? What he is wearing is like that which shrouds the Holy of Holies itself.

But not only was he to be clothed according to these ritual instructions, Psalm 132:9 makes it clear that he was to be clothed in righteousness. And, of course,

he had to offer sacrifices (we'll see this in the next chapter and elsewhere in the Books of Moses). He himself had to offer sacrifices in order to be ceremonially clean, so it wasn't just ritual ceremonial garb which prepared him to serve in the Holy of Holies.

Now the Book of Hebrews makes it clear that in the new covenant the day of divinely sanctioned clerical vestments has come to an end, but what they signify continues. They signify a heart consecrated, a life set apart to the worship of God. God expects His people to be set apart to Him and for His worship by the beauty of holiness. Jesus as Priest will enter in His own inherent holiness into that heavenly Holy of Holies as He ministers for us as Priest, but we, too, must be clothed in His holiness and in His righteousness to worship.

By the way, one reason that Protestants don't wear elaborate or symbolic clothing is because of this principle set forth in the Book of Hebrews: that those old shadows and types of the priestly work of Jesus Christ have been transcended by His work, and so there's no symbolic clothing. The reason we wear black robes at First Presbyterian Church on Sunday morning has no liturgical or symbolic significance. There's a practical and a historical significance to it. The practical significance is that you don't sit there wondering about the suit that the minister is wearing that day, or the weird tie that he's wearing, so it keeps you from thinking about the minister and allows you to think about the message. The historical significance of it is that black robes like we wear, Geneva gowns, were what teachers wore in the sixteenth century, and the ministers of the Reformation wanted to stress to the people of God that they were simply teachers of the word of God. So that's where the black robes come from.

Now our Catholic friends still have some fairly elaborate clothing that they wear. I'm sure that many of you have heard of the story of the irreverent Tallulah Bankhead, who was reared in Alabama and who had family, by the way, from Como, Mississippi. You may not have known that. When she attended her first Christmas Evening Mass at the majestic St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, she was overawed by the pomp and circumstance. And Cardinal Spellman himself began processing down the aisle in all his regalia, and he was swinging his censor and incense was wafting everywhere, and smoke was going everywhere. And as he neared the place where Tallulah Bankhead was seated, she leaned into the aisle and with her deep voice she said, "Dah-ling, your dress is beautiful, but your purse is on fire!" (Another good reason not to have ceremonial clothing, by the way, in the new covenant era!)

The point of all this, in verses 2-4 and in verses 40-43, is that the priests are to be clothed in a manner that prepares them to minister for the living God.

Then, if you turn back to verse 1, cast your eyes on chapter 28, verse 1...we'll see that the old covenant priesthood descended from Levi and Aaron, and when we put in contrast to that the teaching of the Book of Hebrews, and especially

Hebrews 7, we will remember that the new covenant priesthood [that is, Jesus] was descended from Judah and Melchizedek as opposed to Levi and Aaron. The fact that in Exodus 28:1 as elsewhere it is stressed that the high priesthood is to be from the Aaronic line reminds us that Christ's high priesthood is of an entirely different order than that of the old covenant shadows and types. His priesthood is of a different order than the Aaronic or the Levitical priesthood. Indeed, that's a major argument in the Book of Hebrews, where the author explains (if you look at Hebrews 7:14-17) that it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests. And He is in the likeness of Melchizedek not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of indestructible life, for it is attested of Him "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

And the author of Hebrews goes on to argue that Christ's priesthood was superior to the Aaronic priesthood because it was secured by a better oath and covenant, a better promise of God; it was superior because it was permanent, whereas the Levitical priesthood was temporary; it was superior because it was perfect. Jesus was perfect. He needed to offer no sacrifices for Himself before He served the people of God.

And so in the New Testament you have these two interesting conundrums that are thrown out to you: How can David's Son be David's Lord; and, How can the High Priest of God come from Judah? How can Jesus be a priest for the people of God and come from the line of Judah? And the Book of Hebrews explains that He's a Priest not according to Aaron, not according to Levi, but according to Melchizedek; and in him, of course, both the kingship of Israel and the priesthood of Israel is combined. Jesus is the one and only High Priest of the new covenant, and in Him we have become a kingdom of priests.

And that leads us to one last thing. Look at verses 9-12, and verses 15-21. Here we see emphasized the principle of representation, in that the high priest in two different ways bears the names of the people of Israel, of the tribes of Israel, on his body as he goes into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. This principle of representation is indicated in the ritual dress that he wears and in the twelve mounted stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel; and we learn from this that God's people enjoy His presence through priest-representation and -sacrifice. [And it's the same, by the way, in the new covenant, but the Priest is Christ, the representative is Christ, and the sacrifice is Christ.]

But here in this ritual dress by which the high priest bore the names of the tribes of Israel before the Lord, carved on the onyx stones implanted on the shoulder pieces of his ephod, and also represented in those stones which were mounted on his breastpiece, we see not only a memorial for the people under the old covenant, but pointing forward to the work of Jesus Christ. The high priest bore the people's names before God. He was their representative; hence, the stress on the stones being — where? — close to his heart. In the Holy of Holies, in a

sense, he became Israel federally. He became Israel covenantally. He became Israel representatively. The high priest was Israel, and if you were an Israelite, you went into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies in and through, and only in and through, that high priest. He was you going into the presence of God. He was Israel. Now, no one could have missed that point with the symbolism of Exodus 28.

And, furthermore, he bore the tribes of Israel into God's presence as their intercessor, as their mediator. He simultaneously served as a reminder of the special gracious presence of God that Israel enjoyed as being His chosen people, and at the same time He is a reminder of Israel's ongoing need for forgiveness. He intercedes; He offers sacrifices for Israel, that God might spare Israel, pardon her sins, and accept her in spite of her sins into His presence. And so he's a reminder of Israel's need for forgiveness as well as the Lord's willingness to forgive.

And we should not miss the impression that the garments of the high priests made on the collective psyche of Israel and endured down through the ages. Do you remember when Daniel is at the Tigris, in Daniel 10, and he's interceding for the people of God because he knows they're sinful? They've been taken into captivity because of their sin, and he longs for them to be released from their captivity, but he realizes they're still sinful. And so, at the Tigris he is interceding with God, he's pleading with God to forgive his people, and the Lord sends an angelic messenger. Do you remember how Daniel tells you that that messenger is dressed? He has a hard time describing him to you, because he's so glorious: he shines, he's blindingly clothed. But Daniel does manage to tell you this, in Daniel 10:5: He was wearing white linen and a golden waistcoat.

Do you catch what Daniel is saying there? Daniel is telling you that God in His mercy has responded to his prayers for the forgiveness of people by sending an angelic messenger who was clothed in something that looked like the high priest would have been clothed when he went into the Holy of Holies as the representative of God, to claim the gracious forgiveness of God and to ask for it on behalf of God and the claims of the covenant promises.

Daniel had been confessing his sins and Israel's sins in Daniel 9-10, and the Lord comes to him in the manifestation of the clothing of the high priest, immediately reminding Daniel of the Day of Atonement and the forgiveness that can only be supplied by God.

And, so also, my friends, Jesus, our great High Priest, serves as our representative before God, in His finished work on the cross, in His ongoing heavenly intercession. On the cross, He is His people federally. He becomes the One who receives our sins. He bears our sins: "By His stripes we are healed." He becomes the people of God; He receives the due penalty of the people of God; and He is the only Priest and representative of His people in the new covenant,

because in Him we enter into God's very presence.

You know, it's very striking, isn't it, when you get to John 19, that in John 19:2 and in John 19:23, as John describes the scene of Jesus' crucifixion, the words of Exodus 28 come back to his mind. John the Apostle, as he describes the crucifixion of our Lord, is struck by the fact that the Roman soldiers placed on our Lord's sore back and shoulders a robe of purple. Those Roman soldiers did it to mock Him, but John tells it to you because he knows that everyone who has read his Bible will know that around the ephod of the high priest of Israel was worn a robe of scarlet. And in the supreme irony, the persecutors of Christ had donned on Him the royal garment of High Priest for His people.

But John's not done with it yet, because when you look down to John 19:23, and John sees the soldiers struggling to part the tunic, the linen, the white linen tunic of Jesus which they had taken from His now naked body, they can't separate it because it's seamless. And John knows from Exodus 28:31-34 that the high priest's robe was woven as a seamless tunic, and he's pointing to Jesus as the High Priest of His people, even as these Roman soldiers taunt Him and attempt to divvy up His goods.

John's point is very obvious: Jesus is our great High Priest.

May God be praised as we study this, His word. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Lord and our God, we cannot begin to do justice to the richness of the interconnectedness of Your word. Only You could have written a book over the span of 1500 years and connected it in history and in precept in the way that You have. All of these things bear the marks of Your divine, grand, good, redemptive intelligence and purpose. We pray, O Lord, that as we contemplate the minute instructions for the high priest of Israel contained here in Exodus 28, that our eyes would ever be on our great High Priest, who ever lives to intercede; and more, who is the very reflection and representative of His people at the right hand of the Almighty, and in Whom one day we will not only virtually be surrounding the throne of grace, but in Him actually surrounding the throne of grace....[tape ends]

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