

Worship by God's Design - Studies on The Tabernacle

Midweek Teaching Series

Part 7 - The Priestly Garments

Read: Exodus 28: 1-14

As important as the design of the Tabernacle was to communicate God's requirement for the worship of his people, how their mediators (the priests) approached worship was just as important. Chapter 28 of Exodus details for us how the priests were to be dressed and what the significance was in their attire.

The Tabernacle could not function without a priesthood to oversee the sanctuary and offer the sacrifices for the people. So, God's instructions for the Tabernacle include directions for the priestly garments and how to consecrate the priests for service to the Lord. Verse 1 identifies for us Aaron and his sons as the priests of Israel. It is God who makes this appointment, telling Moses to set apart the individuals whom He has chosen to represent Israel in worship and serve in the Tabernacle. The office of priest was not one that should be bought and sold and not one that just anyone could fulfil. Near the time of Christ, the Jews sometimes fought over the office, and the Romans at times deposed the high priest to appoint another of their choice. Nevertheless, the priesthood as instituted was God's appointment, not man's.

Before giving detailed instructions for the priestly garments, God tells Moses in verse 2 that the clothing has as its purpose "glory and beauty". This verse helps us understand that God appreciates beauty in the things that are used in worship and everything in the corporate praise of God's people. In verse 3, we see that these garments would be made by those whom God gave a "spirit of skill." Our Creator would give artistic skill to individuals for making the fine priestly garments.

The Priestly Ephod

The first thing we see is that the priestly garments were to be made of "gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen" (v. 5). This should sound familiar because these were the same materials used to create the curtains for the walls of the Tabernacle. The fully clothed high priest would in a sense resemble the Tabernacle, indicating a special association with God Himself. God would dwell among the people of Israel in the Tabernacle, and the high priest was like a mini Tabernacle, a place where the Lord would dwell among them and walk among them in the courtyard of the Tabernacle. In light of the fact that God became incarnate as the Lord Jesus Christ to be our Great High Priest, it is easy to see how the priest's resemblance to the old covenant Tabernacle, God's dwelling place, anticipated the incarnation, for in Jesus God dwells most fully and perfectly, as John 1:14 tells us,

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Hebrews 6: 19-20 goes further to show us that the priests in the Old Testament point us to Christ and his work in fulfilling the requirements of the law by saying,

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, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.



The ephod was something like an apron. It was a square or rectangular garment that the high priest wore over his robe. It didn't have sleeves and covered his body from his shoulder to his thigh. A woven band or tie secured the ephod around the priest's waist. On the shoulder pieces of the ephod were two onyx stones set in "gold filigree," one for each shoulder. The names of the twelve sons of Israel were engraved on the stones, six of the sons on one, and the other six on the other. The significance of this shows that the high priest represented the entire covenant community before the Lord. When the high priest carried the blood into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement, as recorded in Leviticus 16, and when he carried out his other priestly duties, he was standing in for the entire nation, interceding on behalf of the people. In God's covenants, one person can represent others, as demonstrated by Christ.

The Breastpiece of Judgment

Read: Exodus 28: 15-30

Over the ephod the high priest wore the breastpiece of judgment. This breastpiece functioned as a pouch for the Urim and Thummim, which were used to discern God's will. Like the ephod and the curtains for the Tabernacle, the breastpiece of judgment was made of gold and of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns. Again, the similarity between the Tabernacle and the priestly garments made the high priest in a sense a mini Tabernacle. God's presence in the Tabernacle was associated in a special way with the high priest himself, thereby anticipating Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, who is the very incarnation of our Creator. Hebrews 2: 5-18 shows us this in its fullness.

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 2: 17-18

The breastpiece of judgment featured twelve precious stones arranged in four rows, three on each row. The names of the twelve sons of Israel—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Naphtali, Issachar, Gad, Asher, Dan, Zebulon, Joseph, and Benjamin—were inscribed on these stones, one name on each stone. As we saw with the ephod how the engraving of these names on the stones on the high priest's shoulders revealed the high priest as the representative of Israel, and having them on his breastpiece reinforces the point. He carried the names of Israel on his heart, pointing to the fact that Christ, the Great High Priest, has His people on His heart. Matthew Henry comments,

The high priest had the names of the tribes both on his shoulders and on his breast, intimating both the power and the love with which our Lord Jesus intercedes for those that are his. He not only bears them up upon his heart, as the expression here is, [but] carries them in his bosom, with the most tender affection. How near should Christ's name be to our hearts, since he is pleased to lay our names so near his!

The Priestly Robe and Turban

Read: Exodus 28: 31-38

The high priest wore a seamless robe with small pomegranates, which signified abundance, once again pointing us to the Garden of Eden. The robe also had bells, and these served a more sobering purpose: if the high priest died in the glorious presence of God, the bells would stop ringing and the community would be made aware of his death. He also wore a turban with a gold plate on his forehead that read, "Holy to the Lord" (v.36). The high priest had to wear the turban during his ministry so that the holy gifts of the people—their sacrifices—would be accepted by God. This gold plate tells us two things. First, it served as a reminder that God set apart the high priest for His service and by extension that the whole nation of Israel was set apart unto the Lord. Second, the forehead plate of the high priest also functioned as a call to faith. The mere presence of the gold plate did not make the sacrifices effectual, as if the plate were a totem or other object that imparted some kind of magical power to the religious rituals of ancient Israel that made them work to atone for sin. Holiness is the quality of being set apart, but people are not truly holy in Scripture unless they trust in the Lord and demonstrate that trust by seeking to follow His commands.



Application for Today

From Exodus 28 and the detail of the priestly garments, we can see in the care that God takes in detailing proper worship under the old covenant—from the choice of priests down to the very clothes that the priests would wear—that the church and its worship are matters that we should take seriously. We cannot just make things up as we go, but we must look to what the Lord has revealed in His Word, seeking to follow His instructions.

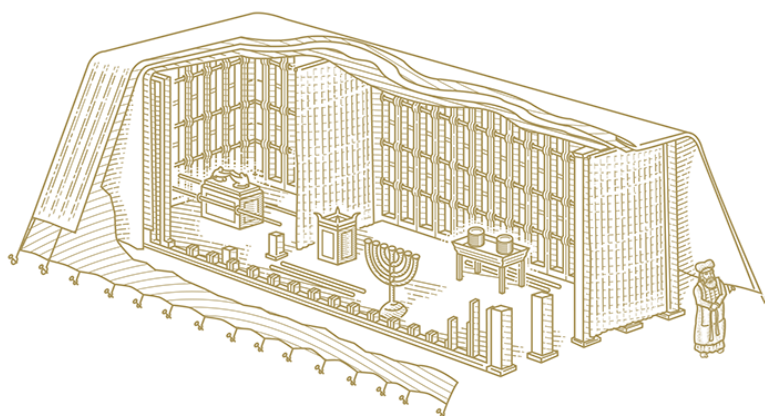
The priests in general and the high priest in particular were mediators between God and his people. If the ultimate goal was for Israel to be a kingdom of priests, they first needed their own priests to mediate between God and their community.

The book of Hebrews repeatedly describes the work of Christ in mediating through prayer for His people. He is not praying for His people in the abstract. As the old covenant priest had the specific names of the children of Israel on his breast as he prayed, so Jesus has the names of His people on His heart when He prays. He is interceding now specifically for all those who trust in Him, and that is a comforting thought. Paul assures us of this in Romans 8:34,

Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

As we consider what we learn from the priestly garments, the only garment that will keep us safe in the presence of God is the righteousness of Christ, His perfect obedience given to us in our justification by faith in Him alone. If we are trusting in anything else to be right before God, we will perish, but if we are resting in Jesus alone, His righteousness gives us eternal life. As John writes in 1 John 2: 1-2,

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.



Questions for Further Study

1. What greater understanding do you have of Christ as you reflect on the design of clothing for the high priest and what each part meant for the worship of God's people?
2. How do the priestly garments in Exodus 28 fit in with the overall design of the Tabernacle and how do they point forward to Jesus?
3. How can greater understanding of the garments of the High Priest draw you closer to God as you live for him?

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