

The Breastplate of Judgment

Exodus 28:15-30

A work uniform tells you the position someone is in, and it also equips him to do the job. On the heart of the high priest is the breastplate of judgment, the names of the tribes of Israel written on beautiful stones. Judgment means wisdom, righteousness, and the will to do right (cf. Is. 11:2-5; 1 Kgs. 3:11ff.). The Urim and Thummim are inside the breastplate, where God answers and leads His people into faithful and victorious life.

NOTES:

Overview of the Text

Like the ephod, the breastplate is artistically made with gold, blue, purple, and scarlet, and fine woven linen (v15). This is a heavy, shiny, glorious piece of work. It's a span long and wide, the distance from the end of the pinky finger to the tip of the thumb of an outstretched hand, about nine inches (v16). The length is doubled because it's divided and sown into a square. There are four rows of three stones each, twelve altogether, one for each tribe (v17). Hebrew lacks vowels, so the tribal names would easily fit: "Zbln" for Zebulun, for example. The onyx stones on the shoulders of the ephod have the names of the sons of Israel (Gen. 50), but on the breastplate are the names of the tribes as arranged at Sinai (v21; Num. 2). First row: Judah (sardius), Issachar (topaz), Zebulun (emerald). Second row: Reuben (turquoise), Simeon (sapphire), Gad (diamond). Third row: Ephraim (jacinth), Manasseh (agate), Benjamin (amethyst). Fourth row: Dan (beryl), Asher (onyx), Naphtali (jasper). The names are written as engravings of a seal or signet, set in gold, with a pure golden chain for attaching to the ephod (vv20-22). There are four rings: two attached to the shoulder pieces of ephod with golden chains, and two to the ephod and the belt (vv23-27). These rings and chains securely fasten the breastplate to the ephod, thus to the priest (v28). Aaron bears the names of the sons of Israel on the breastplate over his heart when He goes into the holy place as a continual memorial the Lord (v29). Inside the breastplate of judgment are the Urim and Thummim, stones of some kind, which are consulted to determine the will of God (v30).

Glorious & Beautiful Stones

The high priest intercedes between God and His people. He represents Israel, worshiping, serving, and praying to God on their behalf. What is Israel to God? Beautiful, sparkling, glorious, precious stones adorned and arrayed. The colors are stunning: light red, bright yellow, grass green, dark red, deep blue, pink, buff, red-streaked, purple, pale yellow, light green, and clouded gray. We aren't certain of all these colors or their meaning, but Moses lays out the strengths of the tribes in Deuteronomy 33. Judah, for example, is red, first to lead Israel out in conquest: "Let his hands be sufficient for him, and may You be a help against his enemies" (Deut. 33:7). God puts radically different stones side by side, all beautifully crafted by Him. The new Jerusalem has slightly different stones because it has transformed by Jesus Christ. It has the twelve names of the apostles on the twelve foundations, and the twelve gates made of twelve pearls (Rev. 21:14, 19-21). Paul speaks about the way church is built: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which

The Breastplate of Judgment

Exodus 28:15-30

is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward" (1 Cor. 3:11-14). Precious metals and stones must be purified and polished, a fiery and clanking process, but one overseen by the Spirit of wisdom. This is the same Spirit who filled the craftsmen who made the breastplate. Beauty and glory in the house of God is not produced at a salon but in the smithy of the Spirit. Were we to draw no explicit applications from this passage, it would be enough to meditate on this artistry.

Sealed Upon His Heart

Aaron carries the people of God, tribe by tribe, set as a seal on his heart (vv29-30). The heart is not only the center of affection, but the mind and will also. God's people are strapped with golden chains fastened to golden rings, always front and shining center on the priest. He would always remember them and he would continually remind God of them. People today wear heart pendants with names or pictures of their loved ones on them. "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame" (Song. 8:6). The high priest loved Israel and loved God and was jealous for their relationship. Aaron is like the tabernacle, and at his center is a breastplate like the ark. The ark has the two tablets of the law inside, and inside the breastplate is the Urim and Thummim. On top of the ark is the mercy seat, and on top of the breastplate are the stones of the tribes of Israel, the objects of God's mercy. We are precious stones written on the heart of Christ our high priest: "Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). When we have His law written on our hearts, kept by His grace, we radiate and shine as precious stones.

Urim & Thummim

We don't know much for certain about the Urim and Thummim. Urim may mean "lights" and *Thummim* "perfections". Or, completely different, Urim may mean "curses". So if the stones are cast, Urim would be mean "no" and Thummim "yes". If the stones are letters from Aleph to Tav (A to Z), then by pulling a few out the priest would know the answer to his question. This is an oracle where you ask God questions to know what to do. Joshua consults the Urim and Thummim to know when Israel should go forward in the conquest (Num. 27:21). God would not answer disobedient King Saul, and He answers David (1 Sam. 28:6; 1 Sam. 23:1-2). The Urim and Thummim correspond to the law of God, His will: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thess. 4:3). We have the law and the Spirit Himself dwelling in us so we don't go to Urim or Thummim. By faith He guides us into all truth (Jn. 16:13; cf. Acts 1:26).