

Exodus Sermon Series

A Perfect Priest

Exodus 39

The tabernacle is almost done. While the entire structure symbolizes the people of God, the people who serve there are most important. The last items to finish the work are garments that equip the high priest to minister to the Lord and His people.

Overview of the Text

Bezalel and Aholiab make garments for Aaron, just as Yahweh commanded (v1). Aaron is like a walking tabernacle with gold, blue, purple, scarlet thread and fine linen decking him out from bottom to top (v2). He has “curtains” at the bottom/courtyard; in the middle, in the holy place, he has the tribes of Israel represented on the breastplate of judgment, similar to the twelve loaves on the table of showbread; and on the top of his head it says “Holiness to the Lord” (vv30-31), like the most holy place. Vern Poythress calls him “a vertical replica of the tabernacle.” The multi-colored ephod has onyx stones set in gold on the shoulders, which are engraved with the name of the tribes (vv2-6). These are memorial stones for the sons of Israel (v7). The breastplate is also artistically woven and has twelve stones for the twelve tribes (vv8-14). Golden chains fasten it securely to the shoulder straps and the belt of the ephod (vv15-21). The high priest has a robe woven of one piece with a cutout for the head, and pomegranates and bells alternating at the bottom (vv22-26). Aaron and his sons have tunics of fine linen, hats, and sashes (vv27-30). A crown of pure gold fastens on the turban of the high priest with a blue cord (vv30-31). The children of Israel bring all the finished pieces to Moses (v33). He sees that everything is completed just as the Lord commanded and blesses them (v43).

A Competent Priest

The priest is decked out from head to toe. His form fits his function: holy service in God’s house. If you serve at the tabernacle, you must be holy. The priests are cleansed continually at the laver, but their clothing also communicates this. The white linen tunic and undergarments cover the shame of nakedness and symbolize purity (28:42-43). On top of that is the blue robe woven of one piece, and then the ephod of many colors, displaying both glory and authority (vv3, 22-24; cf. Gen. 37:23). All of this is required for the office of priest. He is cleansed from sin but also strengthened by the Spirit, consistent and whole like his robe, meditating on the law and bearing the fruit of the Spirit. He strives to love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, faithfully confessing his sins and walking in the light. The modern church wants authenticity above all else, but Scripture requires holiness. If you are holy first, then you will be authentic—honest and genuine. But if a priest is unholy, even if he is honest about it, his service will not honor the Lord or edify His people. The high priest carries Israel on his shoulders. He represents all the people and can’t do this without the gifts and blessing of God, which are his competence. The tabernacle was only a copy of God’s tabernacle in heaven (Heb. 8:5). Jesus came directly from the Father. From His childhood, He grew in wisdom and knowledge, and He was holy and without sin. Because of this, when Jesus spoke, His words carried weight and everyone noticed (Mk. 1:22). He gives us His word to equip us for

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every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The entire New Testament church is a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9), but God calls pastors, elders and deacons to be equipped to serve the body. The ministry ought to be saturated with the word of God and therefore competent to bring wisdom to bear in every situation.

A Caring Priest

Israel rides on the priest's shoulders, but she is also fastened to his heart. He must be competent to lead, but do so with sacrificial love: "For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness" (Heb. 5:1-2). The phrase *have compassion* can also be translated *deal gently*. It describes the way the priest ministers, which must be informed by the knowledge of his own weakness. A faithful priest speaks the truth in love. He loves God who is the truth, his neighbor who needs that truth, and therefore does all he can to deliver the good news. The breastplate of judgment has stones for each of the twelve tribes, reflecting God's love for His beautiful people. The high priest is constantly reminded but everyone sees it. The Urim and Thummim are inside the breastplate, like the tablets inside the ark, where the high priests seeks wisdom to protect, teach, and lead his people. As a full man and faithful man, Jesus knows more about resisting sin than anyone: "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Giving in to sin is no help against it. We need a priest who faced every temptation and said *no* so He can teach us how to do the same. Jesus is the one who knows how to resist temptation and hate sin, and He offers His wisdom and support to you.

A Continual Priest

Aaron repented of the golden calf and from what we know was good high priest as long as he lasted. But that's the problem: "Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing" (Heb. 7:26). You can have a competent and caring priest, but he's going to die on you. "But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. 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. 7:24-25).

Conclusion

Jesus ministers to us from heaven. He also ministers to us through the church. Even here under Moses we're told the people do faithfully "as the Lord commanded" seven times (vv1, 5, 7, 21, 26, 29, 31). Moses evaluates and confirms this, and then blesses the people (vv42-43; cf. Gen. 1:31). How much more is Jesus, our perfect priest, instructing, loving, and interceding for us? "Marvel now, O heav'n and earth, that the Lord chose such a birth."