

The God Who Is Holy (Part 3 of 6)

The First Priests and What it Says about God, Worship, and Us

Exodus 28:1-14

Mark Vroegop

“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 and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. 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. 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. They shall receive gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen. “And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and of fine twined linen, skillfully worked. It shall have two shoulder pieces attached to its two edges, so that it may be joined together. 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. You shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, 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. 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. 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. You shall make settings of gold filigree, and two chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; and you shall attach the corded chains to the settings.” (Exodus 28:1–14, ESV)

Last week we learned that the Tabernacle was designed to be a piece of holy ground amid a world that had lost its way. It was designed to be a dynamic symbol – a worship center where the people of Israel could fellowship with their holy God. It was a place of order in the midst of chaos, a place of peace in the midst of a world broken by the effects of sin.

For those of you who were not with us last week, I linked this idea of sanctuary in the Old Testament to what it means for us to “be the church” in 21st Century America. I listed seven pastoral thoughts on the Supreme Court’s decisions regarding so-called same-sex marriage. These things helped me to frame my thinking and to settle my heart. But even more, they gave me a new and perhaps clearer sense of mission in the world.

I think this is what God-centered worship does. It satisfies something deep within us, and this is especially true when the world and culture show its brokenness. In other words, I needed to worship last week. But you know what? I need to worship this week too!

Worship was so important to God that He went to great lengths to identify very specifically what colors, fabrics, materials, and dimensions were to be used in the construction of the Tabernacle. God's instructions were so specific because worship is that critical to our life as human beings.

Everyone Worships

Did you know that this week is the beginning of one of the most important months of worship for 1.5 billion people around the world? On Monday evening the Muslim month of Ramadan begins and lasts until Wednesday, August 7. Islam means "submission" and the month of Ramadan is an expression of that submission to Allah through fasting from sunrise to sunset from all eating and drinking. Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam which they believe gain them favor on judgment day. In other words, it is what must be done in order to be right with God.

Nate and I were talking about this, and he told me that the really spiritual Muslims will refuse to even swallow during Ramadan. They are so committed to cleansing and restraint that from sunrise to sunset, nothing goes in the body. Muslims take this month very seriously because their eternal destinies depend upon it.

Last week I received a booklet that grabbed my attention. It is a 30-day prayer guide for the Muslim world, and Nate's team has a limited supply of them if you would be led to pray for the Muslim world during the month of Ramadan¹. So if you'll commit to pray every day (or at least try to), take one of those prayer guides in the atrium.

I share this with you because I want to remind you that humans were made to worship. Every one worships. And that worship is based upon a person's view of sin, atonement, forgiveness, and judgment. Worship is based on your understanding of what is required to approach God.

The First Priests: Consecrated Mediators

Exodus 28-29 shifts the focus of the text from the facility to the priests who will serve the people in worship. But these two chapters are about more than the priests; they are about two key concepts that inform the worship of a holy God in the Bible: mediation and consecration.

To be a mediator means that someone brings reconciliation between two parties which are separated. From a biblical perspective, sinful people need a mediator between them and God. Moses acted as a mediator of God's Law in Exodus 19-20.

"Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was." (Exodus 20:18-21, ESV)

Notice that the people stood far away, and Moses was the only one who drew near.

¹ You can access an online version of the 30 Days of Prayer for the Muslim World prayer guide at 30DaysPrayer.com.

To be consecrated means to be set apart or dedicated as sacred. It means to be made clean or to cleanse. Again we have heard this in a previous account in Exodus.

“the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.” (Exodus 19:10–11, ESV)

If God was going to come near, then the people needed to be consecrated.

Mediation and consecration are vital aspects of worship in the Bible for one important reason: God is holy. Both concepts are intended to emphasize that approaching God is serious and potentially dangerous. The people saw that on Mt. Sinai, and the Tabernacle was intended to reinforce this concept regularly. You cannot waltz into God’s presence, and you cannot come as you normally are. You need a mediator. And everyone needs to be consecrated.

This is fundamental to what Christianity and the gospel are all about, and we see it clearly expressed in the instructions regarding the priests.

A Mediator

Chapter 28 provides instructions regarding the priestly garments for Aaron and his sons who will serve the people of Israel as priests. Their role is to mediate or to represent the people before God. Therefore, the specific details about what the priests are to wear is not just about appropriate clothing. There is a message communicated. The garments are to be “for glory and beauty” (28:2).

This is confirmed by what we find in verse two, and a theme that will be repeated in chapter 31:

“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.” (Exodus 28:3, ESV)

Sometimes we might be tempted to think that spiritual empowerment or gifting is limited to Word-based ministry. But here we find that God fills certain people with a “spirit of skill” in order to make the garments for the priests. These people are uniquely gifted by God for the important task of making the “stuff” that will be used in worship. And the Bible clearly tells us that they are empowered for this service.

Six garments are listed in verse four and then described in the rest of the chapter: 1) the breastpiece (vv 15-30), 2) the ephod (vv 6-14), 3) the robe (vv 31-34), 4) the turban (vv 36-38), 5) the coat (vv 40-43), and 6) the sash (vv 40-43). The first four are the most important and most significant in meaning. They point to the role of a mediator.

The Ephod (vv 6-14)

The first garment was the priestly ephod which was a sleeveless, vest-like garment comprised of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns along with fine linen, and it was held tight with a belt made of the same material. The color scheme and the quality of fabric were coordinated with the materials used in the construction of the tabernacle.

The most important element of the ephod was the placement of two onyx stones on the each shoulder. Each stone was engraved with six of the names of the sons of Israel in the order of their birth (28:9-10). The significance of this is expressed in verse 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.” (Exodus 28:12, ESV)

These stones placed on the shoulder of Aaron were designed to symbolize that when the priest enters the presence of God, he does so for himself and the people he represents. The priest’s primary role was to “bear their names before the Lord.”

The Breastpiece (vv 15-30)

Over the ephod was a “breastpiece of judgment” which was a fabric pouch containing the Urim and Thummim. These stones held in the pouch are a bit of mystery to us in terms of how they were actually used, but we do know that they were one of the ways that God revealed His will to His people in the Old Testament. “Urim” means light and “Thummim” means dark, and these stones were used in a similar fashion to casting lots in order to discern God’s will (see 1 Sam. 23:9-12 and 30:7-8).² That is why the NIV translates verse 15 as “a breastpiece for making decisions.”

Embedded into the fabric of this breastpiece were twelve stones set in four rows of three. Each of these stones represented one of the tribes of Israel. In this way the breastpiece is similar to the ephod, but it seems to carry even more of an individual tribe focus. The priest bore all the names on his shoulders, but he bore the individual names on his heart.

Verses 29-30 give us a great summary of the role of the breastpiece:

“So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD. And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron’s heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly.” (Exodus 28:29–30, ESV)

Once again we see the role of mediator – a person representing the people of Israel before the Lord. But we also see the role of mediator involves helping the people to discern God’s will. In other words, the priest is a mediatorial conduit between God and the people. He represents the people to God and God to the people.

² Doug Stuart, in his commentary on Exodus, says that the use of the Urim and Thummin was a third and likely last resort in discerning God’s will for matters related to national guidance where mutual agreement was vital. The first and preferable resort was simple obedience to the revealed will of God as mediated through the written covenant (i.e., the Law). Secondly, the people could discern the will of God through listening to a prophet. Third, the Urim and Thummin were used to discern answers to prayer. The drawn out stones could be used by God to give immediate answers to prayers offered by the people.

The Robe (vv 31-35)

Under the breastpiece and the ephod was a robe. It was blue in color, and its most prominent feature was what was placed on the hem. Verses 33-34 tell us that the garment was hemmed with an alternating pattern of decorative pomegranates and bells. The meaning of the bells cannot be determined with certainty. It may have been a way of treating the entrance into the tabernacle with respect as in ringing a bell before entering. And it would have created a sound that people outside the tabernacle heard, connecting them to the activity of priest even though he was not entirely visible.

The Turban (vv 36-38)

The head of the priest was to be covered with a turban and a special gold plate. The plate was to be engraved with the words "HOLY TO THE LORD." This was much more than decoration. Verse 38 captures the significance of the symbolism:

"It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD." (Exodus 28:38, ESV)

The gold plate symbolized Aaron's role as the people's atoning representative. The people's sacrifices were mediated from them to God by virtue of this person upon whose head was inscribed "Holy to the Lord." The priest mediated forgiveness on their behalf.

As you can see, these priestly garments are not merely ceremonial clothes. They are symbols of the important and foundational role of a mediator in worship. The office of the priest and the design of his vestments were intended to communicate that he represents the people of Israel before a holy God. The people needed a mediator. That's the point.

Consecration

Chapter 29 highlights a second fundamental aspect of Christianity and the gospel. Verse one identifies what is also needed:

"Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests..." (Exodus 29:1, ESV)

The priests needed to be consecrated in their service in the tabernacle. The word "consecrated" means "to be set apart or to be made holy." Implicit in the meaning of the word is an assumption that human beings in their natural and normal condition are not consecrated. This is important and foundational to a right understanding of Christianity and the gospel, and we see it reflected here.

The foundational question is: How can human beings draw near to God in worship? Back in Exodus 19 we learned a very important principle as to why God established boundaries around the mountain upon which he dwelt. I expressed that idea with the phrase "God likes you, but He is not like you." God is holy, and human beings are not. That's the problem.

How is someone made holy or consecrated so that God might be approached? There must be atonement. Something must die in our place. Death has always been the penalty and the effect of sin. After the first sin committed by Adam and Eve, God covered the shame of their sin and nakedness with the skins of animals. Something died.

There are three different sacrifices listed here, and each of them has unique significance.

Sin Offering

Aaron and his sons were to gather at the entrance to the tabernacle, washed, and dressed with the priestly garments (29:4-5). Then a bull was to be brought out, and Aaron and his sons were to place their hands on the head of the bull (29:10). This was an act of symbolic identification. The bull was slaughtered "before the Lord," and its blood was poured at the base of the altar and smeared on the horns on the four corners of the altar (29:13). A small portion of the bull was burnt on the altar (i.e., intestinal fat, the liver and the two kidneys), but the rest of the bull was to be taken outside the camp and burned.

As we will see later, sometimes sacrifices included eating some of the roasted or boiled meat – but not the sin offering. The entire bull was to be burnt. It was a costly sacrifice for the high cost of sin. And since it represented sinful contamination, it was taken outside the tabernacle and outside the entire encampment.

First Ram Offering

The next offering involves the first of two rams. Aaron and his sons again put their hands on this sacrifice, it is killed, and its blood is thrown against the side of the altar (29:15-16). However, unlike the sin offering, this sacrifice is to be entirely burned on the sacrificial altar. Everything was offered up to God.

"and burn the whole ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the LORD. It is a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD." (Exodus 29:18, ESV)

As the smoke from grilled ram meat wafted into the air, it was a symbol of this sacrifice being offered to God and God alone.

Second Ram Offering

The final offering was designed to specifically focus on the consecration of Aaron and his sons. The second ram also received the hands of Aaron and his sons (29:19). After the ram was slaughtered, its blood was applied 1) to the tips of the right ears of Aaron and his sons, 2) to the thumbs of their right hands, 3) to the big toes of their right feet, and 4) against the side of the altar (29:20). This was symbolic consecration of their entire body.

Verse 21 is an important verse. It appears that Moses took some of the blood that had been splashed against the altar, mixed it with oil, and sprinkled it on Aaron and his sons. In so doing, Moses was applying the atoning sacrifice to Aaron and his sons personally. They would be anointed with atonement blood, and the effect was that *"He and his garments shall be holy, and his sons and sons' garments with him."*

Verses 22-28 record what happened to the remaining portions of the ram. Part of the ram was completely burnt on the altar after placing the elements into the hands of Aaron and his sons. The breast meat and the thigh meat were presented to the Lord, but then these portions were cooked and consumed (see vv 31-34). They were to “eat those things with which atonement was made...” (v 33).

The three sacrifices were not a one-time event. This consecration was a model for a long-standing sacrificial system. Verses 35-41 give instructions regarding the perpetuity of the offerings: 1) the consecration of Aaron and his sons was to be repeated for seven days (vv 35-37), and 2) two lambs are to be offered every day – one in the morning and one in the evening (vv 38-41). Israel’s life was to be marked by continual, bloody sacrifice.

But the sacrifices are not the ends. They are the means to another end. The tabernacle, the priests, and the sacrifices were designed to be conduits to lead to something even greater:

“It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.” (Exodus 29:42–46, ESV)

God will meet with His people. He will dwell among them. He will be their God. But it will not and cannot happen without sacrifice that leads to holiness and mediation that leads to reconciliation. Therefore, in order for a holy God to have a relationship with sinful human beings, something must die for you, and it must be mediated by someone other than you.

The Sacrifice of Jesus

This is why fasting to earn God’s favor is so tragic and why Christianity is so fundamentally humbling. The loud and clear message from the tabernacle is this: “You are the problem and you cannot fix it on your own.” The consistent theme of the Bible is that we need a mediator who is consecrated so that we can be brought near.

Everything about this sacrificial system was meant to be a prelude to the sacrifice of Jesus. The book of Hebrews provides us with amazing texts that link the life and death of Jesus to this system. It shows us how Jesus was both the priest and the sacrifice.

“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.” (Hebrews 9:11–15, ESV)

Don't miss this! Jesus is both the mediator and offering. He merges the office of the priest and the sacrifice that was to be offered. The sinless Son of God became the sin offering so that we could be made holy. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21 – *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* (2 Cor. 5:21, ESV) This is grace – marvelous, infinite, matchless grace – freely bestowed on all who believe!

And it is grace that changes how we approach our relationship with God, our worship, and our relationship with one another.

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:19–25, ESV)

This is grace that leads to godliness, gratitude, and good works. It changes the basis of why you do anything good – including fasting. Christians do not do good works in order to earn God's favor. There is nothing we can do to self-atone. Our good works spring from hearts that are captured by the love and grace God has shown to us. Christians don't fast out of a desire for God's approval; they fast (or do anything good) out of joyful love for who God is and what He has done. Obedience is not what they must do; it is what they want to do.

This is why Christians sing in their worship and Muslims do not. Why would you sing if you are constantly in fear of not doing enough to earn your god's favor? There is no joy in that. If religion is based upon works, it leads to despair and exhaustion.

The Christian's hope is not in what we could do but in what Jesus did. That makes all the difference in the world! That makes all the difference in eternity. We needed a mediator and we needed holiness. And we find both in Jesus.

Sin and despair, like the sea waves cold,
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
Grace that is greater, yes, grace untold,
Points to the refuge, the mighty cross.

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide.
What can avail to wash it away?
Look! There is flowing a crimson tide,
Brighter than snow you may be today.

*Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.*

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com