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The High Priest's Garments of Glory and Beauty

Exodus 28

The people of Israel were possessed of a magnificent ritual, every detail of which was ordained by God Himself. This has led some to argue for ritualistic forms in Christianity. If God was pleased with such things in Judaism, surely He will be pleased with them in Christianity. So it is urged. But this is to lose sight of the typical character of the ancient ritual. "The example and shadow of heavenly things," is God's account of it all in Hebrews 8:5. Christ having come, and redemption having been accomplished, the reality is ours; the shadows therefore pass away. Christianity being an essentially heavenly and spiritual system, everything connected with divine worship therein is of the simplest possible character. The contrast is complete between the imposing ritual described in Exodus and Leviticus and the simple order of things found in the Acts and the Epistles. Ritualistic symbols are now a positive insult both to Christ and to the people of God. To Christ, because they practically ignore what He is and what He has accomplished; and to the people of God, because they reduce them to a condition of tutelage.

Because Israel's ritual pointed to Christ, the smallest details are given. Nothing is too small for notice that in any way speaks of God's beloved Son. Our present study is Exodus 28. This chapter describes the priests' robes, as the chapter following describes the ceremonies connected with the consecration of Aaron and his sons for the priestly office. The types of Exodus 28 have reference to the needs of the people, those in Exodus 29 to the claims of God.

Let us clearly understand where priesthood comes in in the ways of God. When Israel was in Egypt, groaning under the yoke of Pharaoh, God did not provide a priest but a savior. But when the people were delivered, having come under the blood of the Lamb, and having passed through the Red Sea, then – and not till then – did God say anything about a priest. In like manner today, the Savior is God's provision for the burdened sinner, and the Priest is God's provision for the delivered saint. It is the "holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling," who are exhorted to consider the Apostle and High Priest of their confession (Heb. 3:1). Priesthood is not designed to bring men into relationship with God, but rather to help those who are already in relationship with God.

Let us next observe the point at which the priesthood is introduced in the book of Exodus. Ex. 25-30 are occupied with the Tabernacle, but there is an evident break in these instructions at Ex. 27:19. Down to this verse we have God's manifestation of Himself to man; in that which follows we have man's approach to God. Accordingly, the first part begins with the ark, and ends with the court; the second part begins with the priesthood, and includes the incense altar and the laver, these articles of furniture having to do with man's approach to God, rather than with God's manifestation of Himself to man.

Now observe another thing. The instructions concerning the priesthood are prefaced by the oil for the light (Ex. 27:20-21). This looks irrelevant at first sight, but is it so in reality? Is it not to remind us that the God with whom we have to do, dwells in the light? The time had not come in Moses' day for the blessed revelation that "God is light" and "God is love." Christ alone could bring this to us (1 John 1:5; 1 John 4:8). But the type teaches us what is suitable for the divine presence. All works of darkness must be put off by those who would be before Him in the joy of His presence. "Always" means that the lamps were to burn with regularity. There is no thought of their being alight in the daytime. It was reserved for men in Christendom to invent so childish a practice. "From evening to morning" is God's word.

Aaron and his sons typify Christ and Christians. The priesthood of Aaron's sons depended upon the priesthood of their father as ours depends upon that of the Lord Jesus. They were priests by divine call (Heb. 5:4). Christ's call is found in Psalm 110:4; ours in First Peter 2:5. Aaron's sons are divided into two pairs, the shadow beforehand of the great separation so soon to come (Lev. 10). Nadab and Abihu typify all false worshippers, as Eleazer and Ithamar the true. For the making of their garments "the Spirit of wisdom" from God was necessary. Similarly "men full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom" were required to attend to the money matters of the early

Christians (Acts 6). Nothing, either great or small, can be efficiently wrought for God by unspiritual hands.

The Ephod

The garments are not named in Exodus 28:4 in the order in which they were put on. Compare Leviticus 8:7-9 for this order. The ephod is described first, as being the principal priestly vestment. David's use of the ephod suggests that to him the ephod stood for all that the priesthood represented (1 Sam. 23:6-9; 30:7). The ephod resembled the veil of the sanctuary, but with important differences. There were cherubim in the veil, but not in the ephod. The veil speaks of Christ's holy humanity (Heb. 10:20); the cherubim of government and judgment. We thus learn that these high functions are destined for the hands of the Man Christ Jesus. But the cherubim would have been out of place in the ephod, every detail of which speaks of priestly grace. But gold – typical of what is divine, while unsuitable for the veil, necessarily comes into the ephod, for our great High Priest is "Jesus the Son of God" (Heb. 4:14).

"They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, of purple, of scarlet, and fine twined linen, with cunning work." The gold speaks of the divine in our adorable Lord. Ex. 39:3 shows how it was used. They did beat the gold into thin plates and cut it into wires, to work it in the blue, and in the purple, etc." The gold being thus interwoven with the blue and other colors, none could have separated it without destroying the whole beautiful fabric. And who can separate the human from the divine in our Lord Jesus Christ? The union of the human and the divine in His person is one of the holiest mysteries of our faith. In all His ways and words, as recorded in the Gospels, this union shines forth. For example, in John 4, we see Him as a tired and hungry man on the one hand, and as the Discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart on the other. In John 11 we behold Him, first, as a Weeper (how intensely human), then as the divine Quickener of the dead. In Matthew 14 we observe His giving thanks in the most human manner in the presence of the multitude, and then wielding divine power for the supply of their need. Again, we find Him in Mark 4 at one moment asleep in human weariness, and the next moment with divine authority bidding the winds and waves be still.

Blue is the heavenly color. "The second Man is the Lord from heaven" (1 Cor. 15:47). "He who comes from above is above all" (John 3:31). Unbelief in Israel stumbled at this. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph: whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, 'I have come down from heaven'?" (John 6:42). His spotless

humanity was indeed born of the virgin, and had no existence before, but He who thus condescended to become human had subsisted from eternity in His own proper uncreated glory above.

Purple is the royal color. The Son of God has kingly rights. He who is Priest in the heavenly sanctuary today will be King in Zion to-morrow. "The Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David; and He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). He inherits Joseph's rights as his legal Heir (Matt. 1).

Scarlet – a dye obtained from a worm – speaks of both suffering and glory. So Peter refers to "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that should follow" (1 Pet. 1:11). Was there ever such a sufferer as the Son of God? Is there a being in the universe, therefore, so competent as He to take up all the burden of His people, and to enter into all the sorrows and trials which beset the path of faith? He learned obedience through suffering, and is able in consequence to help those that are tried (Heb. 5:8; 2:18). Scarlet speaks also of earthly glory (Rev. 17:3-4; 2 Sam. 1:24). It is not enough that Christ should be glorified on high; God will see to it that He is also glorified below in His own time. When Satan offered Him "all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them" (Matt. 4:8), He refused them, preferring to receive them from the hand of God when the due season arrives for Him to possess them (Rev. 11:15).

The fine twined linen testifies to His perfect spotlessness. Though born of a human mother the reverse of immaculate, He inherited from her no moral taint; He was emphatically "that Holy Thing" (Luke 1:35). All His ways, too, were stainless. He only of all who have ever walked the earth could say to His critics: "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46).

In all this we have typified such a High Priest as Israel never knew. He is both divine and human, and He combines in His own Person the offices of priest and king. When one of Israel's kings dared to exercise priestly functions he was smitten with leprosy for his presumption (2 Chron. 26:17-18). But the Lord Jesus will, in the coming age, "be a priest upon His throne" (Zech. 6:13). Melchizedek is needful as a supplement to Aaron in order to present this to us in the types of Scripture (Heb. 7).

The Girdle of the Ephod

Exodus 28 contains the divine instructions concerning the high priest's robes; Exodus 39 shows how the instructions were carried out. In comparing these portions one is impressed with this thought – the carefulness of the people to carry

out the will of God to the very letter. "As Jehovah commanded Moses," occurs seven times in connection with the robes alone, and many more times in connection with the Tabernacle in general. The principle of human choice and opinion in divine things had no place in the minds of Israel's workers; God had spoken, and it was their desire to be obedient to His word in every particular. Let us note this fact well as an example for ourselves today.

Following the ephod, we read of the curious girdle of the ephod, which was made of the same materials as the ephod itself (verse 8). The girdle is the emblem of service – compare Luke 12:37; 17:8. When we consider what the gold, purple, etc., mean as typifying the Deity, royalty etc., of our Lord Jesus, the thought is overwhelming that such an One could possibly constitute Himself the Servant of His people. But it is true, nevertheless, so wonderful is His grace. The form of a bondservant, taken by Him in incarnation, will never be laid aside. He was not only the unwearied Servant of all in the days of His humiliation but, like the Hebrew servant of Exodus 21, He had purposed to be Servant forever. Accordingly He ministers on our behalf in the heavenly sanctuary during our earthly pilgrimage; and Luke 12:37 lets us know that when He gets His waiting ones home it will be His joy to gird Himself, and make them sit down to meat and come forth and serve them. Do we appreciate as we should the matchless grace of our Lord Jesus Christ?

The Shoulder-Pieces

We have next the shoulder-pieces (verses 9-13). On these were two onyx-stones, with the names of Israel's tribes engraved upon them, six on each stone. The shoulder is the place of power. Hence the good Shepherd lays His once-lost sheep on His shoulder, and brings it home rejoicing (Luke 15:5). In Psalm 28:9 we read: "Save Your people, and bless Your inheritance; shepherd them also, and bear them up forever" (NKJV). Every saint is thus remembered by the Great High Priest, and is sustained by His power, victorious as it is over all the might of Satan and of death. Merit has nothing to do with this; it is all of grace alone. The names of Israel's tribes were engraved "according to their birth" (Ex. 28:10). Thus Reuben stood first, and Joseph and Benjamin came last. Reuben's appalling failure was not suffered to affect God's thoughts of grace, though it necessarily brought him under His holy hand in discipline (Gen. 49:3-4). If Christ only interested Himself in those who are worthy of His interest, where would even the best of us stand?

The names were cut into the stones "with the work of an engraver in stone, like the engraving of a signet." The names must neither be written nor painted, but cut

deeply and indelibly. The stones were then "set in ouches of gold." The names upon the stones were thus ineffaceable, and the stones themselves could never fall out of their place. The realization of this type is exceedingly blessed. Paul in all his weakness and need in the Roman prison was so consciously upheld by the power of Christ that he was enabled to pen those marvelous words: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). The fact that he had a living Savior in the glory of God gave the word "impossible" no place in his vocabulary. Hear him again in Second Corinthians 12:9-10. Smarting under the infliction of the thorn in the flesh, he thrice besought the Lord that it might depart from him. This could not be, but he was given this sweet assurance: "My grace is sufficient for you; for My strength is made perfect in weakness." The thought of this was so delightful to his heart that he immediately responded: "Therefore I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

The Breastplate

The people's names were not only on the shoulder-pieces; they were on the breastplate also. Why this repetition? There are two reasons for it. First, God would show us that in Christ power and love combine for the blessing of His people. We read in Exodus 28:29: "Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel on the breastplate of judgment over his heart, when he goes into the holy place, as a memorial before the Lord continually." Note the words "over his heart," twice repeated in the verse following. The changeless love of Christ is our solace and joy. John 13:1 is as true for us as for the disciples of long ago: "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." Neither the doubting of Thomas, the denial of Peter, nor the defection of all together could alter the sentiments of His heart towards them. We dare not speak of our love to Him; it is too variable a quantity to be worthy of mention; but we delight to dwell upon His wonderful love to us. The breastplate was connected with the shoulder-pieces by gold chains (verse 25), showing the union of power and love in the Lord Jesus for the good of His people. Each individual saint is entitled to say:

*"Out of myself for help I go,
Thy power alone resolved to know,
Thy love's the plea I make."*

The breastplate was also connected with the ephod itself by blue lace attachments, the reason being "that the breastplate does not come loose from the ephod" (verses 26-28). There must be no possibility of the breastplate getting out of its place for a single moment. The eye of God must never rest upon the priest without being reminded of all His people.

The second reason why the names were inscribed upon the breastplate as well as upon the shoulder-pieces is that God would show us His tender interest in each individual believer. In the shoulder-pieces six names were engraved on each stone; in the breastplate each name had a stone to itself. What a vast family is the family of God, in its millions, spread over all the earth! Yet each individual saint, however poor and lowly, has his own place in the divine affections. The book of Job is very interesting in this connection. It is one of the largest books in the Bible, but it is altogether occupied with the story of God's dealings with one man's soul. So minute is the divine care that not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father, and we have it from the Son of God Himself that not only is the individual saint remembered as the individual sparrow, but the very hairs of our head are all numbered (Luke 12:6).

Turn now for a moment to Joshua 4:7, where we read of twelve memorial stones of a very different character. When Israel passed through Jordan into the promised land, they took up by divine command twelve stones from the bed of the river, and set them upon the Canaan shore. "These stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever." The twelve precious stones in the priest's breastplate were a memorial for God; the twelve rough stones on the bank of Jordan were a memorial for man. The human heart is so forgetful and fickle that there is need of some abiding memorial of God's goodness. The Lord's Supper has this character in Christianity.

What a lovely picture is suggested by the high priest of Israel bearing the names of the people of God upon his shoulder and heart in the divine presence continually! Yet how soon everything failed in the hands of man! The garments of glory and beauty appear never to have been worn in the presence of God after the calamitous circumstances of the day of consecration (Lev. 10). From that point the holiest was closed to the priesthood, save on the annual Day of Atonement, and on that day Aaron was to draw near in white linen garments (Lev. 16:1-4). His beautiful robes were thus worn everywhere but in the immediate presence of God, where, according to the typical teaching, they were most needed. What immense comfort it is for our hearts to know that there can be no such failure in our Lord Jesus Christ!

The Urim and Thummim

In the breastplate, amongst the names of the children of Israel, was placed the Urim and the Thummim. The words mean "the lights and the perfections." What it was, none can now say with certainty. It is mentioned altogether seven times in Scripture; in two of the passages the Urim only is named, and in one (Deut. 33:8) the order is reversed, and given as "Thy Thummim and Thy Urim." It was probably a precious stone, which by means of its various scintillations gave the answer of Jehovah concerning matters that were referred to Him by the priest. That this was its use is undoubted. Thus Eleazar was to ask counsel for Joshua "after the judgment of Urim before Jehovah"; Saul in his last extremity appealed to God by means of the Urim (though he obtained no response); and the governor of the returned remnant was obliged to defer the claims of some unregistered priests because the Urim and the Thummim was not available (Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6; Ezra 2:63). It is because the breastplate contained this instrument by which divine decisions were given that is called "the breastplate of judgment."

It is thus God's delight to make known Himself and His will to those who desire this blessed knowledge. The Urim and the Thummim in the breastplate of the high priest was the pledge that Israel never need be in darkness about any matter. And is the Christian less favored today? With the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, the completed word of God in our hands, and a glorified Christ interesting Himself in us, there need be no obscurity in our minds concerning the smallest detail of our pathway. It is not an uncommon thing to find the children of God blundering along from day to day, making a multitude of mistakes, to the grief of their own souls, and the dishonor of the worthy Name by which they are called. To hear them speak one would imagine that God has given His people up to this kind of thing. In the midst of their blunders they ask in perfect bewilderment how others manage to ascertain the mind of the Lord, and so walk consciously in the light. Self-will is the true explanation of this disastrous condition of things. Where the eye is single, and the heart is true, the path becomes as clear as the noon-day sun.

The Robe of the Ephod

After the Urim and the Thummim comes "the robe of the ephod," which was made wholly of blue (Ex. 28:31). The fact is thus emphasized that ours is a heavenly Priest. "Such a High Priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens" (Heb. 7:26). This is a truly marvelous statement. Who and what are we that no less a priest than this will suffice for our

need? The answer is: we are the brethren of Christ, His sanctified company, and partakers of the heavenly calling. Heavenly people need a heavenly priest. If Aaron were on earth today, and were to come amongst us in full canonicals offering us his gracious services, our reply could only be that a priest of his order is of no manner of use to us. His priesthood was earthly in its character, and was exercised in an earthly sanctuary on behalf of an earthly people. The feeblest Christian stands on higher ground than Israel ever knew. A priestly caste in Christianity, whatever form it may assume, is a base cheat of the enemy, designed for the degradation of the children of God, and to hide from their souls the wonderfulness of the grace of God towards them.

Around the hem of the blue robe were golden bells and pomegranates alternating (verses 33-34). "It shall be upon Aaron to minister; and his sound shall be heard when he goes in unto the holy place before the Lord, and when he comes out, that he die not." The bells and pomegranates speak of testimony and fruit. 'His sound shall be heard when he goes in.' We know what happened when Jesus went in to God. The Holy Spirit came forth, and set the golden bells of Gospel testimony ringing in this dark world. We hear their joyful sound in Acts 2. The fruit quickly appeared, three thousand souls being blessed on the first day. God be praised, the bells are still ringing, and the fruit is still being gathered. The sweet story of the Gospel has reached our ears, and we are some of the fruit thus produced for God.

The bells also sounded when Aaron came out from the divine presence. In like manner a fresh sound will be heard when the Lord Jesus comes again. A new testimony will be commenced in the earth, and abundance of fruit – a new crop – will be gathered by means of it. Israel, not the Church, will be God's witness in that day: "(...) out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:3). It will be the time of the world's blessing. Israel being restored to divine favor, all the ends of the earth shall fear Jehovah (Ps. 67). "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of Jehovah, as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9). In connection with this new testimony there will be a second outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29). It is often said by pious people who feel the present low and unspiritual condition of things, that the Church needs a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of God. This is incorrect. The power and blessing vouchsafed at Pentecost is with us still, in spite of all our failure and sin. The great need of the hour is an awakening amongst the children of God as to what the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit means. There will be no second outpouring of the Spirit until the High Priest comes out of the heavenly sanctuary to inaugurate the new era.

It may be a question with some as to whether the new testimony of which we have spoken involves a further opportunity of salvation for those who are now rejecting

the Gospel. By no means. All who in this day are privileged to hear the proclamation of the grace of God, yet do not bow to the Lord Jesus, will, after the present testimony is ended, be given up to the lie of the Antichrist to their eternal ruin. As to this, Second Thessalonians 2 is perfectly clear. But the world's unevangelized millions (what a reproach to the Church that there should be such!) will hear the new message of God; and abundant will be the harvest.

The Holy Crown

We come now to the plate of pure gold, with its striking inscription: "Holiness to the Lord" (Ex. 28:36). This was fastened to the forefront of Aaron's mitre by a blue lace. It is twice called "the holy crown" (Ex. 39:30; Lev. 8:9). We are thus reminded that ours is a crowned Priest. He whose blessed brow was once encircled with the crown of thorns is now crowned with glory and honor" (Heb. 2:9). Whatever God saw in the people of Israel, He always saw holiness in the priest. Typically, of course, for, personally, Aaron was no better than his fellows. The golden plate was put upon his forehead, "that Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things, which the children of Israel shall hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall be always upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord" (verse 38). The high priest was thus responsible for the people in divine things, i.e., in all matters concerning their worship and sacrifices. Surely there are no occasions on which we so much need the gracious intervention of the Lord Jesus as when we assemble for worship. Such is our infirmity that, with the purest of motives and with the best of intentions, we are utterly unable to render spiritual sacrifices to God in perfection. More serious still, in all that transpires there seldom lacks sin. Our comfort lies in the fact that all our offerings come before God through the hands of the perfectly Holy One in His presence. God looks at Him – at His perfections, and so accepts His people and what they bring. Faith says: Look away from me" (Ps. 39:13); "Look upon the face of Your Anointed" (Ps. 84:9).

There is a day coming for Israel when, not the high priest's mitre only, but even the commonest of their possessions will bear the inscription, "Holiness to the Lord" (Zech. 14:20). This will be in the day of glory – earthly glory, according to their hope. In our case, heavenly glory will yield this blessed result, for which every pious soul yearns. We shall be absolutely and wholly for God throughout the ages of eternity.

There remains to be noticed Aaron's embroidered coat, of fine linen, with its accompanying girdle of needlework (Ex. 28:39). This coat was worn as an inner vest (Lev. 8), and it typifies the personal purity of the Son of God.

