

Prayer

As we face all that lies ahead, Lord Jesus, establish our faith firmly so that we live the Gospel in which we believe. May we not be guilty of religious hypocrisy, and may we be kept secure in our faith through all the circumstances of our personal lives. Maintain in us the truths we have been given through revelation and the Word, so we may praise You throughout our lives, and forever; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: 'Anointing'

Pray that God will anoint His people not just for special ministry and for leadership, but for the essential Christian witness of 'loving one another' within the fellowship of the church.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for those you know who show God's love
- Pray for local migrant workers
- Pray that Christians will heed the prophecies being given about our world today

Meditation

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the wonder, majesty and greatness of creation;
speak to me through the quiet whisper of a breeze,
the wonder of colour, or the flight of a simple butterfly.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through history, and through the lives of great people;
speak to me in the everyday events of my everyday life,
both in what seems important, and also what seems trivial.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the magnificence of music that touches the soul;
speak to me through psalms, hymns and songs of praise,
those songs of faith that linger within and teach Your truth.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through epic events unfolding in the world all around us;
speak to me in the trials and joys I experience every day,
and show me how You care for all things, even me.

Bible Study - Exodus 28 (1-6,15,21,29-30,41,42)

¹ Then, from among the Israelites, bring near to you your brother Aaron and his sons with him, to serve me as priests: Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. ² You are to make sacred vestments for Aaron your brother, to show splendour and honour. ³ You are to instruct all who have wise hearts, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, to make Aaron's vestments for his consecration into priestly ministry for me. ⁴ These are the vestments they are to make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a chequered tunic, a turban, and a sash. They are to make these sacred vestments for your brother

Aaron and his sons to serve in priestly ministry for me; ⁵ they shall use gold, blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen.

⁶ They are to make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, worked with skill. ... ¹⁵ You are to make a 'Breastpiece of Judgment', worked with skill; you are to make it in the style of the ephod; you are to make it of gold, of blue and purple and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. ... ²¹ There are to be twelve stones, with names according to the names of the sons of Israel; they shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, representing the twelve tribes. ... ²⁹ In this way, Aaron will bear the names of the sons of Israel on the Breastpiece of Judgment over his heart when he goes into the Holy Place, as an everlasting remembrance before the LORD. ³⁰ You are to put into the Breastpiece of Judgment the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart when he goes in before the LORD; so Aaron will for ever bear the judgment of the Israelites on his heart before the LORD. ...

⁴¹ You are to place them on your brother Aaron and on his sons with him, and you will anoint them, ordain them and consecrate them, so that they may serve in priestly ministry for me.

Review

As part of what God said to Moses while he stayed with Him on the top of Sinai, Moses was told that he had to 'clothe' Aaron as a sign of his priesthood. Exodus 28 records these instructions, and the whole chapter describes the details of these six items of clothing; the breastpiece, ephod, robe, tunic, turban and sash (28:4). The garments described were doubtless wonderful, and an impressive sight for all who saw them, but at this point in Exodus, many Christians feel that this has little to do with their faith. They know that the New Testament describes Jesus' fulfilment of Old Testament 'Law', and whilst we can learn much from the Old Testament, they might feel this is a passage of specialist interest with little to say to the everyday Christian.

It would not be wise to pass this Scripture by, however, without considering carefully what it has to say. Our passage is the very first in Scripture that describes something of what God requires from His 'priests', and although it means Old Testament priests, we should have in mind the fact that the New Testament describes all God's people today as His 'priests'. We are a 'royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2:9) acting for God in the world. So within the intricacies of this passage about vestments, there are hints at how we should live and behave as God's priests in the world today.

To begin with, we might expect that the passage says something about what these vestments mean; what is the purpose of the ephod, for example, or the turban (just as Paul tells us the purpose of the pieces in the 'whole armour of God' – Eph. 6:10-17). Unfortunately, we only find out a little about what the vestments are for! Nevertheless, what we are told is still important. Firstly, the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are inscribed on the twelve stones on a 'breastpiece' (28:21f.), so that 'Aaron will bear the names of the sons of Israel ... when he goes into the Holy Place' (28:29.30). This represents the first function of a priest, which is to represent people to God. Secondly, we are told that God requires the very best in terms of design, artistry and workmanship in the making (28:5,6) of the clothes, just like that of the Tabernacle (Exodus 26,27). The clothes must show 'splendour and honour' (28:2), to celebrate the majesty of God, and the work of the priest is to illustrate the honour and majesty of God through what he wears.

From this, we can conclude that we who are God's priests in the world today must bear its needs to the Him just as Aaron bore the names of the twelve tribes before Him in the

Tabernacle; and secondly, we must demonstrate to the world the glory and honour of God in some way.

You may feel that this is something of a dead end in terms of our study, because no one would wish to go around wearing fancy clothes in order to demonstrate the wonders of God, and if they did, they would be branded as worse than eccentric! However, the Old Testament gives us further clues. Psalm 132 says; 'let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let the faithful shout for joy!' (132:9). This psalm is a powerful prophecy that speaks of the coming of God's Messiah in the line of David (see 132:1,11.), and it goes on to say; 'Its priests I will clothe with salvation ... but His enemies I will clothe with disgrace!' (132:16,18). The psalm speaks about us now, of course, and the privilege and honour of being 'clothed in righteousness' because of the saving work of God through His Son Jesus. So now, in the days of God's New Covenant, He asks us to display this magnificent 'clothing' to all the world; the 'righteousness' and 'salvation' of the saved children of God!

There is more for us to explore in this text, but this is how it connects with us today.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Why does God choose Aaron and his sons; who are they?
- What did the vestments look like?
- What function did the vestments have in Israel?
- What are the 'Urim and Thummim' in verse 30, and what do they do?

Notes on the text and translation

- V1** ***'bring your brother Aaron and his sons with him, near to you'** The phrase 'bring ... near to you' could mean 'join' or 'incorporate'. If this is the case, then this phrase is not simply about getting Aaron and his sons to come close to Moses, but about incorporating them into the priestly work that Moses was already doing. The priestly line in Israel would be Aaron's not Moses.*
- V3** ***'You are to instruct all who have wise hearts, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill'** This translation is fairly close to the Hebrew, and you will notice that it speaks of a 'spirit of skill' (or perhaps, 'spirit of ability'). Some translations have 'gifted with ability' or something similar. Here is one of the first indications in scripture of a connection between 'the Spirit' and 'gifts'. Though be careful, because this is not always clear in various translations.*
- V3** ***'for his consecration into priestly ministry for me'** Aaron is not ordained into a priesthood to serve Moses (which is implied by the NIV; 'so that he may serve me as a priest'), but into a priesthood shared with Moses to serve both the people and God. It is hard to find a translation that expresses this adequately, but this is clear in Hebrew.*
- V30** ***'they shall be on Aaron's heart when he goes in before the LORD'** We use the word 'heart' in this sentence because the breastpiece is clearly placed over this part of the body. However, the Hebrew word 'lev' translated 'heart', often means a person's inner being, or even their 'mind'. It would be equally correct to say 'they shall be on Aaron's mind when he goes in before the Lord ...'.*

Going Deeper

Why does God choose Aaron and his sons; who are they?

Moses knew that his leadership of God's people could not go on forever. In those days it would have been natural for a leader like Moses to hand over the reins of power to his son, but after being reunited with his wife and sons (Exodus 18:2), we hear no more of them in Scripture. God had other plans, and this involved splitting his two of his main roles in leadership. Moses had already been grooming Joshua to take over the leadership of the people (see Exodus 17:9 and 24:13), something happened formally when Moses died (Deuteronomy 31:7f.). His other roles was to act as an intermediary between God and the people, and for this, God had already chosen Aaron (see Exodus 4:14). Moses was commanded by God in this passage (28:1f. and also 40:12f.) to hand over his priestly role to Aaron and his sons; it became clear that the priesthood should be passed down through the generations of Aaron's family.

Four brothers are mentioned here; Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. It seems that Nadab and Abihu were the senior brothers (perhaps twins?) because they are always mentioned in the Bible together. They had already been with Moses and Aaron their father on Mount Sinai to meet God (24:1,9f.); however, later on in the story of God's people, these two brothers acted in an unholy manner before God. They acted against God's laws of holiness, and lost their lives in highly controversial circumstances (Leviticus 10:1f.). Consequently, Eleazar succeeded his father Aaron in the priesthood (Numbers 20:25f.), and his descendants include Zadok, the High Priest in the days of King Solomon. The descendants of Ithamar included Eli, who served the Lord at Shiloh, and also Abiathar, who was David's High Priest.

Everything in this passage was of great importance for the high priestly family of Israel and its descendants, and although we may not appreciate the clothes designed by God to represent Old Testament priestly duties, their symbolic significance was enormous. In Jesus' day, these garments were kept under lock and key by the Roman procurator. They were released to the High Priest (Caiaphas) only on festival such as Passover. The power wielded by the High Priest one who wore them was seen by Rome as a threat!

What did the vestments look like?

Below are some photographs of attempts to re-create the vestments described in our text.



will bear the names of the sons of Israel on the Breastpiece of Judgment over his heart when he goes into the Holy Place, as an everlasting remembrance before the LORD. ³⁰ You are to put into the Breastpiece of Judgment the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart when he goes in before the LORD; so Aaron will for ever bear the judgment of the Israelites on his heart before the LORD.

³¹ *You are to make the robe of the ephod all of blue. ³² It is to have an opening for the head in the middle of it, with a woven binding around the opening, like the opening in a coat of mail, so that it may not be torn. ³³ On its lower hem you are to make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the lower hem, with bells of gold between them all around; ³⁴ a golden bell and a pomegranate alternating all around the lower hem of the robe. ³⁵ Aaron must wear it when he ministers, and its sound will be heard when he goes into the holy place before the LORD, and when he comes out, so that he may not die.*

³⁶ *You are to make a headband of pure gold, and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, 'Holy to the LORD.' ³⁷ You must fasten it on the turban with a blue cord; it shall be on the front of the turban. ³⁸ It is to be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron will take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations; it will always be on his forehead, in order that they may find favour before the LORD.*

³⁹ *You are to make the chequered tunic of fine linen, and you are to make a turban of fine linen, and you are to make a sash embroidered with needlework.*

⁴⁰ *For Aaron's sons you are to make tunics and sashes and headdresses; you are to make them for their glorious adornment. ⁴¹ You are to place them on your brother Aaron and on his sons with him, and you will anoint them, ordain them and consecrate them, so that they may serve in priestly ministry for me.*

⁴² *You are to make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh; they must reach from the hips to the thighs; ⁴³ Aaron and his sons are to wear them when they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister in the holy place; or they will bring guilt on themselves and die. This is to be a perpetual ordinance for him and for his descendants after him.*

Full text

¹ Then, from among the Israelites, bring near to you your brother Aaron and his sons with him, to serve me as priests: Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. ² You are to make sacred vestments for Aaron your brother, to show splendour and honour. ³ You are to instruct all who have wise hearts, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, to make Aaron's vestments for his consecration into priestly ministry for me. ⁴ These are the vestments they are to make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a chequered tunic, a turban, and a sash. They are to make these sacred vestments for your brother Aaron and his sons to serve in priestly ministry for me; ⁵ they shall use gold, blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen.

⁶ They are to make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, worked with skill. ⁷ It must have two shoulder-pieces attached to its two edges, so that it may be joined together. ⁸ The decorated band on it shall be of the same workmanship and materials, of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. ⁹ You are to take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ As a gem-cutter engraves signets, so you must engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel; you are to mount them in settings of gold filigree. ¹² You must set the two stones on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel; and Aaron will bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders as a remembrance. ¹³ You are to make settings of gold filigree, ¹⁴ and two chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; and you must attach the corded chains to the settings.

¹⁵ You are to make a 'Breastpiece of Judgment', worked with skill; you are to make it in the style of the ephod; you are to make it of gold, of blue and purple and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. ¹⁶ It will be square and doubled, a span in length and a span in width. ¹⁷ You are to set in it four rows of stones. A row of carnelian, chrysolite, and emerald shall be the first row; ¹⁸ and the second row a turquoise, a sapphire and a moonstone; ¹⁹ and the third row a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; ²⁰ and the fourth row a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper; they are to be set in gold filigree. ²¹ There are to be twelve stones, with names according to the names of the sons of Israel; they shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, representing the twelve tribes. ²² You are to make for the breastpiece chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; ²³ and you must make for the breastpiece two rings of gold, and put the two rings on the two edges of the breastpiece. ²⁴ You are to put the two cords of gold in the two rings at the edges of the breastpiece; ²⁵ the two ends of the two cords you must attach to the two settings, and so attach it in front to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod. ²⁶ You are to make two rings of gold, and put them at the two ends of the breastpiece, on its inside edge next to the ephod. ²⁷ You must make two rings of gold, and attach them in front to the lower part of the two shoulder-pieces of the ephod, at its joining above the decorated band of the ephod. ²⁸ The breastpiece will be bound by its rings to the rings of the ephod with a blue cord, so that it may lie on the decorated band of the ephod, and so that the breastpiece does not come loose from the ephod. ²⁹ In this way, Aaron

If you read through the entire chapter (28) and attempt to understand the details about these garments, then you may well feel that whilst some things are clearly defined others are not. As in any age, people know certain things as a matter of general fact; they knew what an ephod or turban looked like and needed no detailed instructions for these. They only needed instructions for what would have been different. The instructions for the ephod for example, describe elaborate design work of 'gold, blue, purple and scarlet' cloth (28:8), the same high quality material and colourings used for the Tabernacle (26:1,31). The ephod had two shoulder straps set with stones with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel engraved on them (28:9-12). The garment was set with gold filigree and chains of fine gold (28:14); a magnificent sight, and high quality work required of people on the move in the desert!

If you look at the two pictures above, the two models demonstrate two completely different views about how the ephod was designed, as given in this text. The one on the left is like an apron or skirt held together by a sash (the text gives us no details about the sash - 28:39). The one on the right assumes it to be an 'all over' back and front piece of clothing with shoulder straps (28:12). The trouble for us now is that this tells us little about what an 'ephod' was or what it was used for, except that it symbolised the presence of God; and in other religions it was used for divining (discovering the will of the gods – see Judges 18:14f.). Eventually, Israelite tradition came to associate this with the divine authority of the High Priest.

In each picture above, you can clearly see the 'Breastpiece of Judgment' holding the twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel, and covering the heart of the priest. This is described in the extended text 28:15-21, and there are substantial and careful instructions about how to attach this to the ephod (28:21-28). The length of these instructions indicates that this was a special piece of clothing, and the detail helped the makers understand what God wanted. The purpose of the garment was discussed briefly in the first part of the study, but with the added significance of holding the 'Urim and Thummim'.

What function did the vestments have in Israel?

The other garments are the blue robe (28:31-35), the engraved 'headband' (28:36 – it is not at all certain what this means, but it was attached to the turban), the fine linen tunic, the turban and sash (28:39). Of these, there is a description of the blue robe and the headband, but not of the other three items; and we have to assume that there was nothing distinctive about them. The problem for us is that we assume the sash must have some role in holding all the clothes together, and this therefore determines what the whole set of clothes looks like (see pictures above), and no one can ever be clear about this from what is given to us in Exodus 28.

The blue robe held an elaborate array of decorations and bells, the tinkling of which would tell other priests that he was alive when he went into the 'Holy of Holies' into the presence of God (28:35)! Such was the fear and dread associated with entering the Lord's presence. The gold headband around the High Priest's head and attached to the turban (28:36) was engraved with the words 'Holy to the Lord' (28:36); this was a declaration of the work of the priest as he took on himself the onerous task of presenting the sins of the people to God on the 'day of atonement' (see Lev 23:27f.). Some believe that Jesus' 'crown of thorns' expresses the same holiness of God around the head of the dying Jesus. This is a poignant thought, and some may have made this connection in the early days of the church, but there is no scriptural evidence for this.

An interesting point is made in verses 41-43, where the priests are required to wear undergarments covering their 'naked flesh'. The reason for this is as follows; when the priests were ministering, they had to climb up a few steps to throw whole burned offerings

onto the altar for burning. As they did so, those standing below might see their 'naked flesh', even by accident, and this was an abomination to God (see the same issue in Ex 20:26).

What are the 'Urim and Thummim' in verse 30, and what do they do?

The 'Urim and Thummim' are an addition to the priestly vestments about which we know very little; they were placed in a 'pouch' in the 'breastpiece'. Similar breastpieces have been found by archaeologists, but the only ones that have survived the ravages of time are metal, and this is the only known description of a cloth one. Breastpieces worn by priests and kings of other nations were known to have stones attached to them for the purpose of divining (determining the will of the gods), and it is thought, but without any certainty, that the Urim and Thummim were used as a means of determining God's will, although their use has always been controversial.

The names of the two stones mean 'lights' and 'perfections', but this has little meaning to us. We could imagine that they might say something about the nature of the God they reveal. Our best understanding of them is that they were used as a sacred form of drawing 'lots', and the simplest example of this is found in 1 Samuel 14:41, where Saul assigned a meaning to each and drew them like lots, as we might 'toss a coin'. We should be careful not to be too negative about such a method of finding out God's will, because the New Testament has one important example of 'drawing lots' after prayer, which is the assigning of the twelfth disciple after the death of Judas (Acts 1:26).

Certainly, there are few references to 'Urim and Thummim' in scripture, and it is believed that as prophecy grew in Israel during later years, the basic means of consulting God was to speak to a prophet rather than draw 'Urim or Thummim' from the breastpiece of the High Priest. Only a few generations after the time of Moses, the work of Samuel brought prophecy to prominence in the life of God's people.

Application

This question always arises in discussion amongst Christians; how do we know God's will? Sometimes we hear God's voice speak to us directly, but we cannot and should not expect to drum up some response from God just because we want it. He controls our relationship, and we do not, so we are grateful when he offers us a direct answer to our requests and concerns. He delights to speak to us perhaps more often than we imagine, but if He appears to be silent, then we must either assume He does not wish to give us a response, or that we must make our judgements as necessary, and learn from our mistakes like anyone else. Some might suggest that 'casting lots' or 'tossing a coin' is an appropriate way of seeking God's will for issues that appear to us to be '50/50' and yet require our decision, and there appears to be some scriptural precedent for doing this. It is surely wrong, however, is to use such methods to avoid the responsibility of taking decisions with maturity of faith in the course of everyday life.

The earlier points we discovered about being 'clothed with righteousness' and 'salvation' (Psalm 132) are surely essential to how we can interpret and apply this passage today. There are a number of New Testament texts that take up this theme, principally; 'as many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ' (Gal 3:27). Also, 'do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourself with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator!' (Col 3:9,10). Paul spoke about the Christian being clothed with the good deeds and evidence of faith as a witness to Christ in the world, and he must surely have had the ancient vestments of priesthood in mind. He knew that the 'clothing' of faith and righteousness was important for everyone called to the 'priesthood of all believers'. In this priesthood, all of us represent God to the world through personal

witness and evangelism (Romans 10:12-17), and we bring the world to the Lord through intercessory prayer (1 Tim 2:1f.); the dual roles of priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9).

Therefore, let us do these things with utmost integrity and with the very best we can offer, just as the people of Israel used their highest skill and craftsmanship in creating these vestments to represent their faith in God. The New Covenant has superseded the Old.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group the meaning of the priestly vestments given to Moses by God. What were they intended to portray?
2. Is it right to 'cast lots' today, and in what circumstances would it be appropriate to use such methods for determining God's will?
3. Discuss why a priesthood was necessary in Moses' day, and whether we need a 'priesthood' today.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

There is something very special about doing one's best for the Lord and putting all one's skill and energy into it. If you have done this, then you will know exactly what I mean. In each of the jobs I have done since becoming a church minister I have given myself to it totally, and often to the exclusion of much else! I have never been disappointed when I have gone further, worked harder, or attempted to do better, especially if I have known that what I do is for the Lord. For me, that is like using my best skills in the service of the Lord, as the Israelites did in creating vestments for Aaron and his sons.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider whether the things you do for the Lord are done to the very best of your ability, and using your highest skills and gifts. It is easy for us to slip into a habit of church attendance in which we do little that requires our 'best'. However, I can assure you that if you do something for the Lord that taxes your abilities and draws the best out of you, you will be blessed.*
- *Pray for the church of God, that it may be blessed by people's best efforts, and that we will not be content with letting things happen with less than our best, for the glory of God.*

Final Prayer

Call each of us, Lord Jesus, according to Your plans for the world and for the future. May we be prepared to play our part in whatever way you require of us, so that Your Gospel may be proclaimed throughout the world, and to Your glory! Thanks be to God; AMEN