

Made to Be Priests

Pray

Draw me, my Lord, into a close relationship with You, so that I may be an instrument of blessing.

Read

EXODUS 28:1-30

Meditate

CONSIDER • Jesus “has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father” (Rev. 1:6). What does that mean to you today?

THINK FURTHER • The instructions now move from the structure of the tabernacle and its furniture to deal with those who will officiate in it, the priests. To begin with, details are given of the high priest’s *ephod*. This was clearly a beautiful garment, but its exact nature is unclear. Some scholars think it was a waistcoat, others that it was kilt-like (2 Sam. 6:14). To add to the perplexity, on a few occasions the word *ephod* seems to refer to an idol (Judg. 8:27). However, the main emphasis here is on the two onyx stones on which are engraved the names of the Israelite tribes. These, we are told, were worn on the high priest’s shoulders “as a memorial before the LORD” (12). A similar phrase is used in v. 29, referring to twelve precious stones on the high priest’s breastpiece, each bearing the name of an Israelite tribe. This expresses a major function of priests in the Old Testament. Their role was both representative and intercessory. They represented the people before God

and “reminded” God of their needs. The high priest also had the responsibility of making God’s will known to the people. In the early days he used the Urim and Thummim as means of doing this. How this “worked” we don’t know. Their use is not mentioned after David’s reign, seemingly being replaced by the giving of *Torah* (“instruction”) based on the Law.

The priests fulfilled these roles with regard to Israel, but Israel was to be a priestly nation, fulfilling these roles with regard to other nations. (Exod. 19:5,6). Under the new covenant, Jesus is our Great High Priest (Heb. 4:14—5:10) and the Church has been given a priestly role towards the world.

APPLICATION • What does it mean to you to be a “priest” to serve God? As a priest, we are to be “intercessors.” Are you praying, not just for your own needs, but the needs of others and for the world? As “priests,” we are also to represent Christ to the world. How will you represent him to those around you today?

Pray

Lord, Your Word says “go into all the world and preach the Good News” (Mark 16:15). May I be more faithful in going and giving, so that Your Good News may spread.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: Joshua 12-15 / Psalm 39

Holy to the Lord

Pray Help me to understand, Lord, what it means to live a life “holy and pleasing to God” (Rom. 12:1).

Read EXODUS 28:31-43

Meditate

CONSIDER • “...as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do...” (1 Pet. 1:15). Is it possible?

THINK FURTHER • The words “Holy to the LORD” on the high priest’s turban are a reminder that he represents “a holy nation” (19:6). In v. 38 the idea of holiness is applied to the people. Preceding chapters have been about a “Holy Place” and a “Most Holy Place.” In the next chapter the priests, their garments and the altar are “consecrated” (in Hebrew, “made holy”) by ritual actions. For many modern Christians the idea of holy places, holy objects and ritually holy people is strange. This is because “holiness” has come to be understood primarily in moral categories, and these are not readily applicable to places or objects, or to ritual actions. However, in the Bible, although holiness includes morality, its meaning is wider. It sums up all that makes God uniquely God. It is sometimes defined as God’s “otherness”—what makes God different and separate from any other being. This divine separateness from human beings is emphasized by the spatial separations of the tabernacle and its court, and also

by the way people and things are intended to be consecrated for service there.

Over-emphasis on this physical imagery alone might lead to a dependency on ritual, divorcing holiness from everyday life. Yet to lose such imagery—and so to narrow our understanding of holiness to morality alone—is also dangerous. When Paul uses temple imagery to appeal for sexual purity (1 Cor. 6:19), the power of his appeal rests partly on his readers’ sense of a temple as “sacred space” which should not be violated. Here the wider meaning of holiness, as a complete expression of dedication to God, supports the narrower, moral meaning. When we lose much of the wider meaning, it may become harder to retain the moral content.

APPLICATION • What do you think it means to live a “holy life” (see 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 4:7; 2 Pet. 3:11b,12a)? How does your life differ from the “world” (see Rom. 12:2)? Will those you mingle with today see God’s “holiness” reflected in your life?

Pray Lord, in view of Your love and mercy, help me offer myself as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to You. Keep me from conforming to the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:1,2).

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: Joshua 16-19 / Romans 13

Consecrated to Serve God

Pray

Draw me closer to You, O Lord, that I may reflect your love and holiness.

Read

EXODUS 29:1-46

Meditate

CONSIDER • Paul called himself and his co-workers “God’s fellow workers” (2 Cor. 6:1). Isn’t it amazing that God works with human beings?

THINK FURTHER • Since all Christians are made to be priests (1 Pet. 2:9), we can learn what it means to be consecrated to serve God from the principles which lie behind the rituals described in this chapter. Aaron was anointed with oil (7). This primarily denoted God’s choice and appointment for service, but it could also be linked with endowment with the Spirit of the Lord (1 Sam. 10:1,6). There was a two-fold ritual of cleansing. First, there was washing with water (4), which clearly symbolizes cleansing. The spiritual significance of this cleansing is brought out by the sacrifice of a sin offering (10-14). Note how the priests identify themselves with the sacrifice by laying their hands on the animal’s head. It dies in their place to deal with their sins. The burnt offering, in which the entire animal is burnt on the altar (15-18) speaks of total dedication to God. The ritual that follows (20) is similar to that used in cleansing a leper in Leviticus 14:14. There

blood from a guilt offering is used, but here blood from a fellowship offering is used (19-28). The fellowship offering was shared between the priests and God. So, the ritual of v. 20 seems to signify their dedication to be co-workers with God, heeding his instructions and being his “hands and feet.” The fellowship offering also speaks of God’s provision for the daily needs of his co-workers (27,28).

Every Christian, cleansed by Christ’s sacrifice, has been chosen and appointed by God for service somewhere. If you are uncertain about your service, start by assuming it’s whatever your daily job is now (1 Cor. 7:17). Dedicate yourself to serving God obediently in it as his “hands and feet.” You may be surprised at the outcome!

APPLICATION • Are you willing to be Jesus’ “hands and feet”? Where will that lead you today? Will his love be reflected in even the common, ordinary aspects of your life?

Pray

“Consecrate me now to Thy service, Lord, By the pow’r of grace divine, / Let my soul look up with a steadfast hope, and my will be lost in Thine” (Fanny Crosby).

Aromas of Prayer

Pray “Teach me to do Your will,” O God, “for You are my God” (Psa. 143:10a). Teach me to pray.

Read EXODUS 30:1-21

Meditate

CONSIDER • “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice” (Psa. 141:2).

THINK FURTHER • A man offers up fragrant incense every morning and evening in the middle of an empty desert (7,8). What does incense *do*, what is it *for*? To the psalmist it was a symbol of spiritual fervor in prayer; heart and mind ascending to God like the aromatic smoke (Psa. 141:2). If you have used incense in worship you will know how it gets into everything; you carry the aroma around with you afterwards—like the presence of prayer. Incense also suggests “pure” prayer offered for no other reason than to adore God, with no strings attached. There is even an element of pointlessness here, since this prayer gives praise “when there is no need to” and “there is nothing to be gained” by doing so. Pragmatic Christians who demand to see returns for their efforts may struggle with this.

God desires in us what every true lover desires, which is for the beloved to understand what he is saying. Love seeks no reward other than love in return, and incense

symbolizes prayer as an answer to God’s self-giving love. “Pure” prayer attempts (however poorly) to make a sincere answer to the Lord which shows that we have understood him. Prayer arises from our deepest interior life as from an altar (3); it is the habitual turning of heart and mind towards him, like a flower tracking the path of the sun. If incense-prayer like this can become the routine instinct of the inner life, it becomes possible for us to respond to that difficult command to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17). Deeper than deliberate thought, beyond words, unceasingly and largely unselfconsciously, the heart breathes its adoration, “and he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:27).

APPLICATION • The altar of incense-prayer was tended morning and evening. What does that picture suggest for your own pattern of devotion? Is your praying a “praising” prayer in gratitude for God’s deep, unspeakable love for you? How will your life today reveal a pleasant aroma to God?

Pray Lord, help me learn to “be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:16,17,18a). I offer You my praise and love.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: Joshua 23,24 / Romans 15

The Work of a Perfumer

Pray Show me, O Lord, how to worship You, so that Your beauty and holiness might be reflected in me.

Read EXODUS 30:22-38

Meditate

CONSIDER • The beauty of holiness has its distinctive scent. Follow it into the presence of the Lord.

THINK FURTHER • Standing within the tabernacle's aromatic fragrances, a thoughtful worshiper might ask, "What is my God like, to use oil and incense to teach me holiness?" (26-28,31,36,37). Delighting the senses, lifting the spirits and calming the mind, welcoming and hopeful, these exquisite symbols speak of both the gladness and beauty of holiness. And since the ingredients for the incense and anointing oil (22-24,34) come from the East—like those of the Magi—we might see a prevision here of foreign nations' future participation in the worship of God (Matt. 2:11; Rev. 21:24).

Practical *unholiness* in our lives is marked by loss, sadness and emptiness, bereft of the fragrance of God's presence, where—fulfilling Exodus' acts of symbolism—the Holy Spirit blesses us with the aromas of grace. This is a rich theme: when Mary poured her "expensive perfume" over Jesus' feet, "the house was filled with its fragrance," a sublime image of how our wor-

ship could be (John 12:1-3). Perfume is irrepressible; everyone is made aware of its presence. Is that what our passage means when it suggests that holiness is "contagious," transferred by touch (25-29)? George Herbert (1593-1633) believed that his only defense against the creeping paralysis of spiritual sterility, barren formality and hypocrisy was to plunge his mind into the "oriental fragranciness" of the two words "*My Master... with these all day do I perfume my mind*" ("*The Odour*," from *The Temple*, 1633). The picture of ministry as the "work of a perfumer" (25,35) is beguiling and, if received and practiced, could transform our worship and witness (2 Cor. 2:14-16). Christ fills the house of the cosmos with the ravishing incense of praise to the Almighty Father, drawing our praise and prayer up into his own, and answering with fire on earth (Rev. 8:4,5).

APPLICATION • How is God using you as the "aroma of Christ," spreading "the fragrance of the knowledge of him" (2 Cor. 2:14,15)? Will those you meet today see Christ's love and beauty in your life?

Pray As I travel through this world, O Lord, help me to so love that others will see Jesus in me. Help me to spread the aroma of Christ to a dying world.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: Judges 3,4 / Romans 16

Every Gift Employed

Pray Teach me, Lord, how to “walk in the light of the Lord” (Isa. 2:5b).

Read EXODUS 31:1-18

Meditate

CONSIDER • “For we are God’s fellow workers...” (1 Cor. 3:9). What a privilege to work with him!

THINK FURTHER • An artist-craftsman is chosen “by name,” as much chosen to work in God’s purposes as the prophet and the priest, and as Spirit-filled (1-3). The Holy Spirit who inspires words in the prophet and sacramental actions in the priest now invokes artistic gifts and technical capabilities in Bezalel and his team (4-6). This is a tremendous affirmation of the life of work as the sphere of our vocation. The conviction that your workplace is your altar originates here. Luther said, “We are priests in our own tasks, in our everyday life; look around your workshop at the hammer and nails, these are messengers from God, use them as a means of serving and loving your neighbors and so do God’s good pleasure.” Too often in the history of the church those who live by the mind have been esteemed above others who live by practical work. In the biblical vision, mind, hand, tongue are seamlessly unified under the wisdom of God (28:3), who brings inspired ideas to inspired fruition (Prov. 12:8,20,21). The composer

needs the orchestra for his success. Thinkers are marooned in a sea of ideas and dreams without the doers and makers. Moses and Aaron couldn’t minister to Israel without Bezalel’s work (Rom. 12:3-8); it is beautiful work (39:32-43), for the beautiful God will be worshiped beautifully. The tabernacle represents God’s promise to meet with his people (7), but it is the Sabbath that is the sign of the covenant (13,16). The Sabbath celebrated the successful completion of creation and the exodus (Gen. 2:1,2; Deut. 5:15); it proclaims that we live not by our own untiring efforts, but by God’s saving and providential activity. How much more so for people who rest in Christ’s resurrection (John 20:1-9)!

APPLICATION • “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Col. 3:23). Are you using your workplace as a ministry for the Lord? Are you working with others in harmony, and as a service to and for God? How will that be shown in your work today?

Pray “Salvation calls for service, a walk with Christ each day; The Master speaks to others as we his life portray” (McNeely). Lord, may my work today be pleasing to You.
