

The Priestly Garments of Grace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 32:1–6; Lev. 21:7–22:8; Exodus 28; Rev. 21:12–14; Heb. 4:14, 15.*

Memory Text: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (*1 Peter 2:9*).

One great theme from the Protestant Reformation is what has been called “the priesthood of all believers,” the idea—derived especially (but not solely) from the above text—that all Christians function as priests before God and that, because they have Jesus, they don’t need earthly mediators (as in some religious systems) between them and the Lord. “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (*1 Tim. 2:5*).

After the life, death, resurrection, and high priestly ministry of Jesus, the old Hebrew system that God had initiated was fulfilled in Christ. The Levitical priesthood has been replaced and a new order established, one in which we all are part of the “royal priesthood.”

This week, as we study the garments worn by the priests in the old system, we can learn a bit about what it means to be priests in the new.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 30.*

Old Covenant Grace

Jesus said it about as clearly as human language could express it: “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48, NIV). It’s a powerful principle, one that we as Adventists, with all that we have been given (and we have been given *so much!*), would do well to take seriously. Just compare the truths we have been given with some of the other doctrines out there (eternal torment in hell, Sabbath changed to Sunday, 144,000 Jewish virgins preaching the gospel when the church is secretly raptured during the reign of the antichrist) in order to understand all that we have been entrusted with.

Hence, it is this principle that makes the sin of Aaron and the golden calf that much worse.

Read Exodus 32:1–6. What possible excuse could Aaron have had for partaking in this flagrant apostasy?

The apostasy itself was bad enough, but that Aaron acquiesced in it seems even more incredible. Think about all that Aaron had been privileged with. Aaron was right there with Moses from the start (*Exod. 4:27–30*); Aaron was Moses’ spokesman before Pharaoh (*Exod. 7:1*); Aaron cast down the rod that became a serpent (*vs. 10*); Aaron smote the waters that turned to blood (*vs. 20*); and Aaron was part of a select few who were able to approach the Lord in a very special way (*Exod. 24:9, 10*). In short, the man had been given privileges that few in history ever had, and yet, when a great test came, he failed miserably.

However, and here’s the amazing thing, God not only forgave Aaron his sin, the Lord eventually allowed Aaron to wear the sacred garments as the covenant nation’s first high priest, a type for the high priestly ministry of Jesus Himself (*Heb. 8:1*). In other words, though Aaron was guilty of a terrible sin himself, he was also the recipient of God’s redeeming grace; grace so great that it not only forgave him but allowed Aaron to assume a sacred office that, at its core, is all about God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness. Thus, Aaron’s life is a special example of mercy and redemption available to all in Christ.

Have you ever failed, even miserably, to live up to what you have been given? How can you get hope from Aaron’s example for yourself that all is not lost, even despite your mistakes?

The Priesthood

“And take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office, even Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron’s sons” (*Exod. 28:1*).

The Levitical priesthood was established during the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel (*see Gen. 14:18*) and was to last more than fifteen hundred years. Although the concept of a priesthood to the Lord had already long existed, the establishment of the Levitical priesthood provided a clearer view of its role.

As we saw yesterday, despite the enormity of his sin, Aaron was chosen by the Lord to become the first head of this new priesthood. This shows that the priests needed to be able to relate to the people whom they represented before God, because that was exactly what they were doing: acting as representatives, mediators between fallen humanity and a holy God. Aaron, as a fallen human being, easily could relate to the fallen human beings whom he was to represent. Who would he be to judge others in their sin when he was hardly innocent himself?

At the same time, the priesthood was a sacred honor, and the priests were to represent holiness and purity. After all, they were the ones who were standing before the Lord in place of the people. They had to be “holy”; otherwise, what was the point of a priesthood? They had to be different, not in an arbitrary way (different just to be different) but different in a sacred sense, a sense that would—while acknowledging their closeness to those whom they were representing—clearly differentiate them from the masses as a whole.

What were some of the things required of the priests, and what do you think these things were to represent? *Lev. 21:7–22:8.*

However difficult some of these concepts are for us today to grasp, the idea nevertheless should be clear: the priesthood was to be something different, sacred, and special. Priests were symbols of Jesus, and their work was to symbolize, in shadows and types, what Jesus would do in our behalf.

Should we be different from the world around us? If so, why, and in what ways?

Priestly Garments

“And these are the garments which they shall make; a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a brodered coat, a mitre, and a girdle: and they shall make holy garments for Aaron thy brother, and his sons, that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office” (Exod. 28:4).

As one studies the earthly sanctuary model, it should be clear that nothing was left to chance. God gave the priests explicit instructions on what was to be done. This also is apparent when it came to the garments that the priests were to wear. Everything was done according to exact instructions.

Read Exodus 28, the description of the clothing that was to be made for Aaron, the high priest, and for the priests in general. Without getting caught up in intricate details, what spiritual lessons can we take in general from what is being presented here?

“The pattern of the priestly robes was made known to Moses in the mount. Every article the high priest was to wear, and the way it should be made, were specified. These garments were consecrated to a most solemn purpose. By them was represented the character of the great antitype, Jesus Christ. They covered the priest with glory and beauty, and made the dignity of his office to appear. When clothed with them, the priest presented himself as a representative of Israel, showing by his garments the glory that Israel should reveal to the world as the chosen people of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Youth’s Instructor*, June 7, 1900.

A great deal has been written over the centuries about the supposed meaning and symbolism of each color and fabric and stone and chain and the like. Whatever their individual meanings, together they represented the perfection and holiness and beauty and dignity of “the great Antitype,” Jesus our true High Priest who ministers in the sanctuary in heaven (*Heb. 8:1, 2*).

Notice, too, in the texts the idea of the priests *bearing* various things (*Exod. 28:12, 29, 30, 38, 42*). This, of course, is a crucial theme in the whole plan of salvation, which the priesthood and sanctuary symbolized—the idea of Jesus, our Substitute, bearing in Himself our sins and taking upon Himself the punishment for them. All of this was foreshadowed through the sanctuary service and the clothing of the priests, filled with symbolism that represented the character and work of Jesus in our behalf.

Breastplate of Judgment

Of all the vestments worn by the priests, the breastplate of judgment (*Exod. 28:15*) to be worn by the high priest was the most elaborate and intricate. The other garments were more like a backdrop to this sacred part of the priestly vestment. Considerable time, about one-third of the chapter (*Exod. 28:15–30*), is spent describing the construction of this sacred ornament. That alone should indicate something of just how central and important it was to the ministry of the priests in the sanctuary.

Read Exodus 28:15–30. What is the meaning of the different stones? What does it mean that the priest would “bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart”? *Vs. 29, NIV; see also Rev. 21:12–14.*

Here, in a unique way, we see again the theme of the priest, a symbol of Jesus, bearing His people. The Hebrew word there for “bear” is a common word in the Old Testament for the bearing of sin, something that the priests would do as part of their ministry (*Lev. 10:17; Exod. 28:38; Num. 18:1, 22*). Now, though, it’s used in the context of the priest bearing the names of Israel; though the immediate context is somewhat different, the idea is still there: God’s people must be completely dependent upon the Lord, who forgives them, who sustains them, and who offers them the power to live the holy lives that He demands from His people (*Phil. 4:13*).

Notice, too, where the priest bears the names of the people. Upon his heart. The text specifically mentions that location, a common symbol in the Bible (and in many cultures) that reveals the love and tender care that the Lord has for His children.

Another important point is that each tribe had a different gem, each with different qualities, to symbolize the distinctiveness of each tribe (*see Genesis 49*). Commentators have seen this as a way to point out the distinctive differences and traits, not just in the twelve tribes, nor just in the Twelve Apostles (*Rev. 21:14*), but of the church as a whole, which is made of various “living stones” (*1 Pet. 2:5, NIV*). No matter how different we all are in personality, character, and gifts, we are still to be united in purpose under the grace and Lordship of our great High Priest, Jesus.

What are ways that you have personally experienced the love of God? How has He shown you that He has you near His heart? Why is it important to dwell on those experiences, and how can you draw strength from them, especially in times of trial?

Jesus, Our High Priest

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (*Heb. 4:14, 15, NIV*). What hope and promise do you find in these two verses that you can apply to your own life and in your own struggle with temptation?

Because Christ resides today as our Priest in the sanctuary in heaven, He, in a sense, wears the breastplate on His heart, as well. And because He “ever liveth to make intercession” (*Heb. 7:25*) for us, we should find comfort in the knowledge that our High Priest is touched with the feelings of our problems, pains, and temptations. Like Aaron, Jesus had been a human being who knew the trials, tribulations, and temptations of all humanity; unlike Aaron, however, Jesus was “without sin,” a crucial distinction, for out of His sinlessness we can claim two wonderful promises: (1) the robe of His righteousness can be ours by faith, and thus, we know that we stand perfect before God; and (2) we can have the power to overcome temptation just as Jesus did.

Read Hebrews 8:10–13. What promises are there for us, and how should these promises be made manifest in our lives?

Here we can see both aspects of what it means to have salvation in Christ, to be covered in His righteousness. How wonderful is the promise that the Lord will be “merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (*vs. 12*). He is talking about those who through faith have surrendered to Jesus and have claimed His New-Covenant promises, those who have His law written in their hearts and thus obey it, not to achieve salvation but because they already have it. Clothed in the covering of His righteousness, they now live out that righteousness in their own lives. That’s the heart and soul of the New Covenant.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Tabernacle and Its Services,” pp. 347, 348, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Lord’s Vineyard,” p. 288, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge,” p. 293, in *Prophets and Kings*; “The Sanctuary,” pp. 250–253, in *Early Writings*; “What Is the Sanctuary?” p. 416, “God’s People Delivered,” p. 646, in *The Great Controversy*.

“Christ is the minister of the true tabernacle, the high priest of all who believe in Him as a personal Saviour, and His office no other can take. He is the high priest of the church.”—Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, p. 74.

“We should daily exercise faith; and that faith should daily increase as it is exercised, as we realize that He has not only redeemed us, but has loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests unto God and the Father.”—Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 287.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read Revelation 1:5, 6, where Jesus tells us about His job description and then gives us what we might call an “eagerly anticipated promise.” Discuss what is meant in verse 6 where He says that He has made us to be “kings and priests” to serve Him forever.
- 2 Go over some of the other garments worn by the priests as revealed in Exodus 28. What spiritual lessons and truths can be found there, as well?
- 3 We have been warned about the danger of pretending to don the garments of righteousness but not really living a righteous life. Talk about ways to evaluate our own motives and actions. How can we know if we really are wearing His robe of righteousness or if we are just fooling ourselves? What are ways to know if we are covered or if we are really walking around in the shame of our nakedness?
- 4 Discuss the idea from Sunday’s lesson about the grace and forgiveness extended to Aaron. This man, who had been given a high responsibility, failed to live up to that responsibility, and, as a result, tragedy ensued. And yet, Aaron eventually was given an even greater responsibility. Is there anything we can take away from this story for ourselves, as a church, when someone given great responsibility also fails to live up to the responsibility? Discuss.

The Power of Influence

Samara is nine years old and lives in northern Brazil. Since she was an infant, her parents have taught her to love and honor God. So, it was natural that when she saw the ice cream vendor come through her neighborhood with a cigarette in his mouth, she told him that smoking was bad for his health and made Jesus sad.

The man threw his cigarette down and asked to speak to Samara's mother.

"Your daughter is a wise little girl," he said. "She has taught me that smoking is bad, and I want you to know that I will never smoke again."

After that, whenever the man passed by Samara's house, he'd ask, "Where's my little teacher?" Samara called the man Tio, which means "uncle." Samara's father talked to Tio about Jesus, too, and invited him to church. Tio agreed, but he lived too far away to attend the family's church, so Father gave him directions to an Adventist church closer to his home. Tio went to that church, and in time, he gave his heart to Jesus.

Sometime later, on a Sabbath afternoon, Samara saw a teenage boy sitting on his front porch next door. It was her new neighbor, Eduardo. She started talking to him and asked him if he believed in God. Eduardo said that they used to attend church, but the family had stopped going.

Samara invited Eduardo to attend the Sunday evening program at her church. Eduardo went and took his little brother. Samara asked the brothers to study the Bible. The brothers agreed, so Samara and her father studied the Bible with them.

When Eduardo finished the Bible studies, he accepted Jesus as his Savior and asked to be baptized. Samara hadn't been baptized yet, so she asked if she could be baptized with Eduardo. Her parents and the pastor agreed, so the two friends were baptized together.

Eduardo's family has moved away, but he keeps in touch with Samara's family and has told them that he is sharing God's love with others and is giving Bible studies in his new hometown.

Samara enjoys sharing God's love with others and credits her parents with being good examples who helped her make sharing her faith a natural part of her life. Recently, when she preached for children's Sabbath, 15 people gave their hearts to Jesus.

Samara knows that age doesn't matter when it comes to telling others about Jesus; God can use anyone who is willing.

SAMARA lives in northern Brazil.