

The high Priest

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[0 : 00] Spend the remainder of our time fixing our eyes on Jesus. Let's pray. We thank you for the good things we've been able to think about! And ask that you'll continue to help us to fix our eyes on Jesus and to consider him and to consider his brilliance and his superiority and his desirability and his glory.

So help us in these things. Now by your grace we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well I have then just really a few thoughts on this matter of the priestly thing that we were reading in Exodus 28 and around there and Jesus.

So I want to, the heart of it is to say that the Bible, as you know, we have the bit that is loosely called the Old Covenant or the Old Testament and then the New Covenant, the New Testament. I say loosely because not everything in the Hebrew Scriptures is technically the Old Covenant. I think the things that happened with Abraham were not technically the Old Covenant.

The Old Covenant comes in through Moses. But to say that the New Covenant is fulfillment of the Old.

[1 : 39] Which means the Old has a value, but it has a value in terms of what it is to be fulfilled. The New Covenant is an upgrade.

So if you are a person with a mobile phone, you'll know that every now and again your mobile phone provider will offer you an upgrade. And your old phone was fine, so you thought, until you realize that the new one has got a GPS and will make toast and do the washing up and everything. You think, I must have that upgrade. And there is a certain direction. You go in one direction and not the other. And the New Covenant is an upgrade on the Old Covenant.

It's worth having the upgrade. Don't go back to the, like it used to be. And one could make a critique of many forms of Christian faith which say what they've really done is gone back on a, whatever the opposite of an upgrade is.

They've gone backwards. Yeah, downgrade usually means a slope down because the downgrade controversy, I was trying to avoid using that word. But yeah, it's the opposite of an upgrade.

[2 : 50] So you get systems of Christianity or sort of under the Christian umbrella with priests again. And you get systems of Christianity with funny uniforms again.

And you get systems of Christianity with holy places and less holy places. And I think the writer to the Hebrews and the New Testament writers would say, what on earth are you doing?

Because the New Covenant is the upgrade. What are you doing going back to the old technology for? It's an upgrade of the Old Covenant which was the bit via Moses.

Now here's a tiny, a little timeline. Creation and fall. The cross of Jesus Christ. And as we go forward from creation and fall, we get to the very significant revelation in Moses.

So I've just done a little blue line there. That's the revelation through Moses. The Old Covenant. And the Old Covenant lays down for us some very, very fundamental principles which are not changed in the New Testament or the New Covenant.

[3 : 58] But they are, it poses questions which are solved in the New Testament. And the law presides over the people of God all the way through until the cross.

And then, as we know, a remarkable transformation occurs through Jesus Christ. And lots of things take on a transformed shape.

I mean, not least the target population of the Word of God goes ballistic and goes off in all directions to all the nations.

And involved in all of that is the fact that Christianity is no longer an ethnic religion. It doesn't define one nation as against another or one political group as against another.

It bursts out of those barriers and bursts out of those categories. And so lots of things change. And what we're looking at this evening, just for a few minutes, is the way that, well, we'll see.

[5 : 03] The Old Covenant, then, via Moses, is a complete package with all sorts of things in it. It has laws for society. It has laws for approaching God, which we might call worship.

It has laws which speak to the very attitudes of people's hearts and says, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The Old Covenant has ways of approaching God. It poses the question, how do we approach God? And it poses the question, or it says, what are the things you have to think about in approaching God?

What might make it easy? What might make it difficult? And here are some solutions. So that's the sort of thing that the Old Covenant does. And I'd like to touch on two things.

So the first one is the Old Covenant in approaching God. Number one, the layout. So this isn't something that we've read, but it's part of the background of it.

[6 : 13] So I've done a brief little sketch there, and I don't vouch for the accuracy of it, and I certainly don't vouch for the scale of it. But let me explain what we have here.

In the Old Covenant, in the system that Moses brought in, there was a way of approaching God. But there was a way of approaching God in a particular graphical layout.

So you have a courtyard. You have a barrier around the outside. So barrier number one.

And then going in, you have a number of hurdles to cross, or places to visit. And they are, number one, the altar.

So you can't get any closer to God without going past the altar. The altar would be a place where they burnt cattle. It's all very precisely described how the cattle is to be cut up.

[7 : 17] And there are different methods of doing it, several different versions of things, which all have to be done in their combination. So you have the altar. And then you have a basin or a lava, where there is washing takes place.

And then the presence of God is to be found within this block here, which is a tent, curiously known as the tabernacle. I don't know why the English translators have chosen to use the word tabernacle. It sounds like a medical condition, doesn't it? But it just means a tent. And the tent itself has, well, the construction of it is detailed in Exodus.

And having said that, I think it's quite difficult because you don't get any diagrams. You just get words. Some of the words, I don't think the translators are completely sure what the current meanings are.

But anyway, it's a complicated arrangement. It works out to be a tent with two compartments. And in the outer compartment, you have a light lamp with seven branches on it, a seven-branched candlestick.

[8 : 38] And I say candlestick, it's worked by oil, if I remember correctly. Anybody know where the seven-fold lamp crops up in the New Testament?

Yeah, the book of Revelation. So the writer of the Revelation says that the ideas that are in theology of it is brought over into the New Testament in terms of the seven lampstands.

What are the seven lampstands in the New Testament? The seven churches. So here in the tent is a light shining in a dark place. And in the New Testament, the writers, well, they don't seem to be saying, make sure in every building that you meet you have a seven-branched candlestick.

It seems to take it another way and say the counterpart to that in the New Testament is you lot. You're the lamp shining in a dark place. So there's the lamp and there's an altar of incense and there is a table with bread on it.

Showing it would appear to be, it's called the bread of the presence, showing that God is constantly feeding his people or something like that. So that's the outer compartment.

[9 : 52] But God himself is found not in this holy place, but in the most holy place, which is that inner compartment there.

And the inner compartment contains this particular piece of furniture, which is a box. I mean, it wouldn't be hugely different, I would have thought, from the table that used to be here, but it's over there.

That sort of dimensions. It's carryable. You carry it on poles. You have to carry it. People have to carry it. That's the way it's transported. It's covered with gold.

Inside it are some important items. There's Aaron's stick that produced buds. There's an example of the manna and the stone tablets that Moses, that were written on with the ten words, if I remember correctly.

So these are all important things and they're there in this box. And this box is, in a sense, God's throne. And there are two throne creatures made out of gold sitting on the top of it, so they're carved out by skillful carvers.

[11:10] And I don't think anybody knows exactly how they were positioned, but I used to tell our children that their wings, one was stretched out like that, and then the other cherubim at the other end was stretched out like that.

And in between them was where God took his throne. And differently from any of the other nations, as regards representing God himself, there is absolutely nothing.

In that sense, it's empty. All the other nations would have symbols of their gods. They'd have a calf or an elephant or, you know, have you ever seen a picture of a Hindu temple?

Because it's got gods crawling all over the outside of it. To my mind, it's absolutely abhorrent. But inside the tent, there is zero to depict God.

It's all about God, but of God himself, there is nothing. So this is the holy of holies, where one would approach God.

[12:19] And if you read Exodus, you'll find there's all sorts of details of how to make the tent, how to work it, when to make the sacrifices, or there's a whole repertoire of different sacrifices.

There's different times that these things are done. And entrance to the holy of holies is in itself a rare and special occasion because it only takes place once a year.

So you might be thinking, he hasn't said anything about Jesus at all. And I haven't as yet, I suppose. But what I can say is that that old way of doing things is complex and difficult, detailed, it's not simple, because any thoughts on why that old system was so complex and difficult and detailed?

Well, this is, yeah, I think that's true.

I think one would also say that it's quite difficult to work out in every detail how it's to do with Christ, but yes. So does that mean that it had to be complicated? Is that the source of the complicatedness?

[13:49] I think I would sort of locate it in that area. I mean, not to say what Zach said was correct, but I tend to think that the source of the complication is the human problem of how we can approach God.

How can sinful people approach a holy God? That seems to me to be the source of the problem, and it's not an easy problem to solve. And the tabernacle and all this system, I think, is testimony to that.

It's not an easy, trivial thing to approach God. As Christians, we might be tempted to think it is easy and trivial, but let's not forget that the problem is complex and a difficult one.

So let's look at Hebrews 10, verses 19 to 22. Hebrews 10, verses 19 to 22. And the writer of the Hebrews is drawing close to the end of his argument, and he's been talking about all these things. And he says, and I think now I've sort of built up to it, you'll agree with me, this is a remarkable statement.

[15:18] So he's talking to Christians, Hebrews 10, from verse 19. He's talking to Christians, and he's saying, do you know, you don't have to wait once a year.

You don't have to have a special person with special clothes. You don't have to wait on the outside of the various barriers. 10, 19. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the barrier, that is his body, through the curtain.

And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Isn't that a remarkable statement? Let us enter the most holy place. We have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus.

Isn't that a radically different thing? Do you see how Jesus, in his amazing work, at a stroke, makes this complex, difficult, impossible, problem, solved?

[16:53] For us. Isn't that amazing? That we can enter the most holy place. That's a remarkable thing. And, let's look at Hebrews 9, 24, where he, he refers to the difference between the tent, the sanctuary, sanctuary meaning holy place in this case, I think, that tent, and what goes on when Christians gather together, and when Christians pray, and when Christians sing, and so on.

For, this is verse, Hebrews 9, verse 24, for Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one.

He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. and he, he's making the point that I think I probably made earlier, that this, even if, it's so detailed, and so precise, the tabernacle and all this paraphernalia, and in a sense has an attractiveness because of that.

He says, that's the flimsy copy, the real thing that embodies the reality of all these principles, and indeed all the details of it, the real thing is in heaven, and Christ has gone into heaven to enter not this man-made copy, but the real thing.

So, that's my, that's my first thought, and perhaps it's a bit of a diffuse thought, but it's saying, isn't it better that we can enter the holy place, this is all very instructive, and we need that instruction, but we have the upgrade.

[18 : 55] Okay, number two. So that was the layout, number two is the personnel and the uniform, and if we were, if we'd been brought up in the Jewish tradition of those days, I think perhaps not quite so much today, but in the tradition of those days, we're going to Exodus 28, 28, we would have, it would have been unquestionable that it all hinged on the high priest.

Now, we had an interesting conversation with Maria's half-sister and her husband last time we went to Cyprus. they were Greek Orthodox, and we tried to say via translation, isn't it wonderful that we have Jesus as a saviour?

And their reply was something like, and of course this came by translation, so it might not be an accurate reflection, but this is what I grasped of it, yeah, he's great, but we have priests, and we have the saints, and you, by implication, you Baptists, you Protestants, you don't have any of that. Interesting, isn't it? They're saying, we put our hope in the priest, and in, I don't know whether you've ever been in a Greek Orthodox church, but you have all the barriers again, and you have the funny clothes, and you have the singing, and the, it's all in old-fashioned Greek so that people don't understand it.

Anyway, it all hinged on the high priest, and people still want it that way. Here's his wardrobe, and you can tell how much detailed research I did on that, but taking it from left to right, first of all, we have the chap pointed, let me just move the microphone around, he's appointed, so that is seen to be an important thing, he doesn't take this task upon himself, because it's a big task, he's appointed, bear with me a second, and then the items of clothing that we read through, so there is the breast piece, or the, breast piece?

[21 : 22] Yeah, breast piece, and that's the one that's got 12, got the 12 semi-precious stones on it, so please don't take that as being particularly accurate, but you can get the general idea, something he has on his front with 12 stones, 12 chunks of semi-precious stones there, that's the breast piece, the ephod is the next bit, and there's two stones that are attached on the shoulders to support the breast piece, and the ephod, if I've got it right, is the bit with the decoration and the bells around the bottom part, then there's the robe, and I think the robe is blue, and then underneath that is the tunic, and then on his head is a hat of some sort, a turban, and the turban has got a label made out of gold sitting on the front of it, which says holy to the

Lord, and it's tied on, and then there's a sash, and then there's the undergarments which just get mentioned at the end, that I think is a reasonable analysis of the clothing, and I'm afraid I don't have the capacity to give you something about each of those pieces, but I can say just sort of standing back and looking at it in a general sort of way, it's a unique clothing, it's not the sort of clothing that you would think, oh, that's rather snazzy, I'll run some of those up myself, and go out to Churchill Square wearing that, it's unique, it's very special, it's rather beautiful, if you think of the colours that are involved, and there's a lot of gold in there as well, it'd be very striking to the eye, a little bit the way, if you go into St.

Bartholomew's Church, if you've been in there, that's designed to do the same sort of thing, to strike the eye, there's lots of gold leaf, and things like that, so it have that sort of striking feature, and this high priest's garments has meanings, some of which, some of which I think we can see, so let's see if we can look at some of the, one or two of the obvious ones, here's the high priest, he's going to go into the holy place on behalf of his people, he's going to be the sort of go-between, between the people and God, he's going to represent them to God, he's going to bring things back from God to them, and he's interceding, he's going in and asking God for favour to the people, even though they don't deserve it, and I noticed, and I found this very striking, in verse 12, it's talking about the two stones, fasten them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as memorial stones for the sons of Israel,

Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders, as a memorial before the Lord, and I offer that thought to you, that when he goes in to meet God, it's got it sort of hardwired into his clothing, who he's going in there for, he's got the names, it's not just people, men, women, children, it's got particular names, of the tribes, and I wonder whether we could take that forward into the New Testament, to think of Jesus, who when he appears in heaven, doesn't just appear in heaven, for the generality of people, but he appears in heaven, with our names, I think that's the thought we're meant to have, so Jesus just doesn't go into heaven for random people, he goes into heaven thinking, Roger, Martin, Steffi, Jenny, people, he goes into heaven for people, and you have it again in verse 21, this is now the bit at the front, which was, you remember, tied so it didn't swing around, there are to be twelve stones, one for each of the names of the sons of Israel, each engraved like a seal, with the name of one of the twelve tribes, so it's the same thing again, itemized even more precisely, I think in a way it was worth coming just to have that thought isn't it, that Jesus stands in heaven, naming us specifically before the father, they've sinned, but please take away their sins, this person sinned, but take away their sins, bless this person, bless this person, bless this person, specific, he's in heaven for us, he hasn't forgotten you, you see, because we can think, oh well, he must have lots of things to think about, but one of those things is us,

[27 : 03] I understand, the priest says, I understand your situation, I know your need, I hear your prayers, and I bring your petitions, your situation, particularly, specifically, personally, before the throne of God.

Verse 29, another item is the when Aaron enters the holy place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart, on the breast piece of decision, as a continuing memorial before the Lord. Now, I haven't done the homework on the breast piece of decision, it's actually mishpat, is the Hebrew word, which doesn't usually mean decision, it usually means way of doing things, or law, or justice, justice.

So, I'm thinking that it's saying that this is another thing that the high priest used to do, he would stand before God in the context of these people needing a way of doing things, these people needing guidance, if you like, and that is part of what he goes into heaven for.

I could also bring in verse 30, the Urim and Thummim, now I don't think anybody knows what they were, if you were to imagine they were like dice, which got thrown, and there was a way of interpreting what the dice came up with, I don't know, I'm not absolutely sure whether that's completely right, but I don't think it's too far wrong, and God would show them, for example, he showed David when to attack and when not to attack, things like that, and that decision, in that sense, that decision making apparatus is right at the heart of what the priest does, and I think that's a remarkable thought, isn't it?

[29 : 03] We have an upgrade on that in the Lord Jesus, I think that's tremendously helpful, because we might be thinking, well Lord, I don't know what I'm supposed to do, I don't know what the future holds, I don't know how events are meant to turn out, there are lots of things I can't plan for, and I might feel very anxious about them, but this is teaching us that that decision making, all those issues, heart isn't always the seat of emotion in the Old Testament, it's usually the seat of wisdom actually, it's the belly that's the seat of emotion, but this Urim and Thummim is there by the heart, so let's go with the wisdom, God has the wisdom to know about us, about our situation, to feed into our situation, the unfolding of the future that we need, and I think that's worth reminding ourselves of, isn't it, because we don't know the future, we don't know which way to go, but somebody has it in hand, somebody has it sort of hardwired into their, well in the

Old Testament it was into their uniform, and how much more does the Lord Jesus have it in his hand, let's take another thought from verse 35, which is the bells, Aaron must wear this piece of the uniform with the gold bells around the hem of the robe, when he enters the holy place before the Lord and when he comes out lest he die, so that he will not die, let's take it with so that he will not die, this bit flags up that there is lethal danger to sinners from the Lord's holiness, holiness.

Now because that danger has been averted for Christians, we are very apt to think there wasn't a danger there in the first place, aren't we? We're apt to think that approaching God is not only wonderfully simple, but also we're apt to think that approaching God is trivial.

Now the priest, I guess he was a bit frightened about doing his job because he had to go into the holy place, he ought to have been a bit scared about it, a little bit like if you were doing abseiling, you know, they say wear a helmet, make sure all the knots are tied properly, make sure there is actually somebody at the top holding the rope and they haven't gone off to get fish and chips while

you say, okay I'm going over the edge, it's something you need to take seriously and, that's made it comical, but the priest, it was a serious matter going into the presence of God, so I think that's a thought that we can profit from, Jesus has made the way open but at great, great cost and here's one more final thought, verse 38, what's he doing as he goes into the holy place?

He is standing in between a holy God and a sinful people and that's his job, to make some sort of interplay between a holy God and a sinful people and after all God has gone to the trouble of inventing the tabernacle so that he can live with his people, he wants to live with his people, that's an amazing thought in itself isn't it?

[33 : 00] And Aaron has the job of going in between the holy God and the sinful people, using the provision that God has made and in verse 38 it says that this label, holy to the Lord, is on Aaron's forehead and he will bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate, whatever their gifts may be.

It will be on Aaron's forehead continually so that they will be acceptable to the Lord. And you think about a tough job description.

He is supposed to go into a holy God, labelled holy to the Lord and deal with the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate.

How could he possibly do that? Do you think that was within his capacity to deal with the sin of his people?

I mean, he is a sinner himself. It makes it, when you put it in that light, it makes it so totally brilliant that Jesus faced with that task can do it.

[34 : 26] Jesus is able to deal with whatever guilt we have, whatever it may be, he is able, as it says in Hebrews, to save completely because his sacrifice was so brilliantly powerful.

No, he goes into heaven armed, if I may put it this way, with a sacrifice, proof of a death that was so effective.

He takes the blood which proves the death and he can do it. Poor old Aaron in the Old Testament, how he managed to sleep at night thinking that's what he had to do.

guilt has to be born by someone and the someone in the upgrade is Jesus and so my final thought is that Jesus does all these things that the high priest did but he does it better, he does it brilliantly. let's think