

Meeting with God

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 27:20-30:38

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Four Sundays until Christmas. Can you believe it? For many, Christmas is their favorite time of year. It's a time of wonder and beauty. That in the midst of the cold and darkness of winter, our hearts would be stirred, and our imaginations captivated.

So the intent of Advent—these four Sundays before Christmas—is to turn that stirring toward the miracle of Jesus' birth, and delight in the hope he brings to a desperate world. And this coming of Jesus to be with us is anticipated in the construction of the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God, among the Israelites.

Therefore, this Christmas season we are walking through the tabernacle of God, as recorded in the book of Exodus. Nearly a third of Exodus focuses on the tabernacle because the dwelling of God among his people is the rightful conclusion to this vast epic. For the revelation of God is found in his rescue and his desire to reside among his people.

Last week we looked at the place of God. The blueprint of the tabernacle. The ark, the mercy seat, the table, the lampstand, and the veils. And we observed God's plan to reside, his place to rule, and his provision for mercy.

This week we continue the blueprint of the tabernacle as we look at its design for communion. One of the wonders that Christmas brings is the truth that you can have fellowship with God. It is truly an astounding statement. That you can know God personally. It means that God isn't just some content to believe, or even just some ruler who sends out commands whom you pay homage to. No, the promise of Christmas is that you can meet with God. It is something every heart either fears, ignores, or pursues. And yet it's the very thing each of us need. What we were made for.

This morning we are going to see God's design for communion with him through the tabernacle, and hopefully understand something of our own communion with God today.

Our passage begins in Exodus 27:20 with two significant shifts that key us into this theme of communion, meeting with God. Today we're not going to read a long passage together, but I would like for you to follow along as we will primarily be in the end of chapter 27 and then all of chapters 28 and 29.

Place to People

The first shift we find is that whereas last week we focused on the place of God's dwelling, today the focus is shifted to the people of God's dwelling.

In the earlier instructions on the tabernacle you won't find any mention of Aaron and the priests, but beginning in 27:20 you find a focus on Aaron and the priests. The instructions for place and people. And the two cannot be separated. You can't have the temple without the priests. It's kinda like Buckingham Palace. Have you ever been there? I haven't. But I've seen pictures. Can you imagine Buckingham Palace without the guards, the stoic men with funny hats? They're part of the

building, essential to the architecture of the place. Even more so, the priests are a part of the blueprint of the tabernacle.

Now, if you remember reading chapter 19, you might ask yourself why they have priests if all of Israel is a kingdom of priests? Well, in chapter 19 God says, “All the world is mine, and you will be to me a kingdom of priests.”¹ See, the intention is that Israel would lead the world toward God. They would act as priests for the world, leading them into communion with God. For the function of a priest is to mediate a meeting with God.

So you can think of it like concentric circles: The high priest and priests lead the Israelites into communion with God in the tabernacle. Then the Israelites function as priests, leading the whole world toward God. So the function of the priest is to mediate a meeting with God, which leads to the second shift into our section.

Tent of Meeting

You’ll notice that at the same time we are introduced to Aaron, the language of tabernacle is replaced with “tent of meeting.” Exodus 27:21 is the first use the term. Then from 27:21-30:38 tabernacle is not used once, but “tent of meeting” is used some fourteen times.

You see, the tabernacle is not simply the place of God’s dwelling, but the place of God’s meeting. The place for communion with God. And it’s at this same time we are also introduced to Aaron and the priests. The significance of which cannot be lost, because the overarching role of Aaron and the priests is to facilitate communion with God.

Look at the priest’s first divine command in Exodus 27:20-21. God says to keep the lamp lit all night. You and your family will do this forever.

This lampstand stood in the Holy Place and gave light to the tabernacle. To keep it lit at all times revealed God’s eternal presence. It was a symbol of God’s watchful care; that all would know someone was home. The priests, they’ll leave the light on for you. Just like Tom Bodett and Motel 6. The light’s on. God’s home.

The priest’s first command was to reveal the eternal presence of God among the people. And in the rest of our passage today we are given the creation of the priests for their role.

So this morning we are going to observe three things: their leading into communion, preparation for communion, and promise of communion.

LEADING INTO COMMUNION

Look with me at chapter 28. Chapter 28 describes the priest’s fashion. It seems appropriate, doesn’t it, that we would talk about clothes this close to Christmas.

Now, even if you don’t care about fashion, it’s important. It’s a form of expression. Often it reveals something about you. It’s why Sarah Beth doesn’t let me dress the girls. Who knew that the purple cat shirt couldn’t go with those pink unicorn pants? But it’s also why welders wear masks and gloves or why doctors wear white coats. It reveals something about their role.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Likewise, the priest's fashion is very revealing (not how you think). It reveals something about their role, to lead Israel into communion with God.

So what did they look like? Chapter 28 outlines four pieces that only the high priest wears: the ephod, breast piece, ephod's robe, and golden crown/diadem. Then also another four that both the high priest and all priests wear: tunic, sash, head covering, and linen undergarments. The priests are to be completely covered. Only their hands, feet, and face are exposed.

The priest's fashion reveals something significant about their role. There are two big ideas and one principle.

The priests lead by bringing the people before God.

Look at Exodus 28:6 where the first garment discussed is the ephod. It's some sort of apron beautifully made of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet. But the main pieces involve two onyx stones engraved with the names of the sons of Israel. Six names on each stone. Each stone is then placed on a shoulder of the high priest. So you can imagine this high priest literally bearing the weight of God's people as he goes about his priestly duties.

What's their purpose? Look at 28:12 with me: "And you shall set the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel. And Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance."

The purpose is to lift the people up before the Lord. To bring the people before God in remembrance. Now, it's not like God is an old man who forgets his people and the priest has to remind him. What he means here is that the priest lifts the people up in prayer. It's like the psalms that cry, "remember your people, O Lord." A prayer of petition on the basis of God's covenant with Israel.

I was talking with Craig Alexander and he helped me understand this more fully. The priest also carried other stones of remembrance before his heart. The total imagery is of Aaron lovingly carrying his people to God like the friends who carried the paralytic to Jesus for healing. It reveals that we need the help of others to come before the throne of grace.

And just as Aaron is the high priest we have a High Priest who carries our burdens before the Father. But also, each of us who believe are a priesthood of believers who lift up one another in prayer. We must be a people who lift one another up in remembrance before God, because we need one another in the pursuit of fellowship with God.

I hope you know that as a church staff we regularly pray for each of you. In our community groups, prayer for each person is a significant way in which we minister to one another. In our adult, student, and kids' classes we regularly lift one another up in prayer. For we must be a people who bring one another before God in prayer.

The priests lead by bringing God before the people.

The priests bring the people before God, and God before the people. We see this in the breast piece of verses 15-30. This is the most described piece of priestly fashion. It was ornate and intricate. It, too, bore the names of the sons of Israel over Aaron's heart, for the remembrance of God.

It was also the location of the Urim and Thummim. If you know what those are, please tell me after the service. It's unclear. But what we can tell, they were evidently two or more stones with which the high priest could give God's judgment for the entire people. It wasn't like some personal magic eight ball. It was a way God gave for his divine judgment to come before the people. So Aaron would bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the Lord regularly. The priests brought people before God and God before the people.

There are other pieces of their fashion we could describe: like the gold diadem to remove the guilt of a blemished offering, or the robe and sash. Or the command in verses 42-43 to wear underwear or die. Parents write that down; tell your kids.

But I want you to see that these two roles—bringing the people to God, and bringing God before the people—are wrapped up in the image of their clothing. It's a concept repeated at the beginning and end of the chapter. Look at verse 28:2: "You shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty." And then again in verses 40-41 for glory, beauty, and consecration (or holiness).

***The priests lead the people into communion with God
clothed in glory, beauty, and holiness.***

The clothing of the priests reflected something of the God who was present. The priest's clothes testified to the God who is present among his people. This clothing identified them as a mediator, the one who might lead the people into communion with God.

Holiness. They were set apart for the job. A holy people in a holy place for a holy work. Reflecting the holiness of the God who dwells in the temple, and leading others into holy living.

Glory. It was a weighty job they had. The priests represented the honor of God before the people. And they were the first to praise the God of all glory, and lead others in it.

Beauty. I heard a pastor once quip, "Isn't it fascinating that the invisible God cares how he is visibly worshiped?" The priests were arraigned in beauty to reflect something of God's creativity and artistry. Our God desires us to see something of his creativity and design.

I know that in our day talking about art or beauty seems too secular, or co-opted by radical agendas. But we can see here that beauty is a concern of God. A God who is a creator of beauty. And beauty has a unique way of opening us up toward the realization of God.

Leonard Bernstein, of the New York Philharmonic, famously reported that when he heard great music and beauty he sensed "heaven." He said, "[Beethoven] has the real goods, the stuff from heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down."

Our God is a God who creates beauty. And when our hearts are stirred by beauty, it awakens our longing for the one who is truly beautiful. Of course when we strive for beauty in and of itself it becomes twisted and idolatrous. But when earthly beauty leads us to the God who is all-glorious, beautiful, and holy it achieves its rightful end.

For glory and beauty and holiness lead us to believe there is more to this world than just the material. When you view a magnificent painting, are enraptured by the chorus of a song, see a beautiful sunset, or even when you witness someone's care for others in need, for a moment you can see that there is more to this world than what you can see or touch. It pulls you toward the one who is all-glorious, beautiful, and holy. Thus, the high priest is clothed in glory, beauty, and holiness to lead the people into communion with the glorious, beautiful, and holy God.

And while we're not priests like Aaron, I would say the same is true of us today. However, we are not clothed in priestly garb, but rather, as Galatians says, we are now clothed in Christ—Christ, born in a manger, the one who donned the very glory, beauty, and holiness of God. For we wear Christ; fleeing all sin and vice, we pursue purity and righteousness that it might lead others into communion with God.

Communion with God requires the right clothes. Have you put off your old self, which belongs to your former and corrupt way of life? Have you put on Christ? Have you put on “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... and above all these love” (Col. 3:12)? This is the clothing of Jesus that leads others into communion with God.

PREPARATION FOR COMMUNION

On August 2017, Sarah Beth and I saw the total solar eclipse. We went to three different stores to find those special glasses. We drove up to some friends' house in Liberty and we stared at the sun as the sky went dark.

Did you have a chance to see this? Well, have you ever tried to look directly at the sun when it's not an eclipse? It's dangerous. It's too powerful, too intense. It'll literally burn a hole in your retina. That's why if you want to look at the sun you have to get those special glasses or one of those pinhole cameras you make as a kid.

Getting near God is sort of like that. If you were to come into the presence of God you would burn up. He's too powerful, too intense. He's too holy. And we're not.

Every culture has identified some infinite difference between humanity and the divine. And has known that bridging the gap is no small thing. But what makes Christianity different is that we don't believe that it is up to us to bring God down that he might give us favor. Our God has come to dwell. He has come to meet and have communion with his people.

And with the creation of his dwelling place he has also created a way for sinful people to approach a holy God. For the role of the priests is to mediate the communion of God. But before the priests can do their job, they themselves have to be prepared for communion. Look with me at Exodus 29:1: “Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests.”

How do you turn a person into a priest? He himself has to be consecrated, which means to be made holy. From verse 1 through 37 you have the instructions for turning a person into a priest. It reads like an intricate cookbook. Verses 1-4 say to get a bull, two rams without blemish, unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil. Then verse 5 and following are the instructions for when and how much to use each ingredient and where. Did your Thanksgiving cookbook look anything like that?

We notice two very significant things in this preparation for communion.

People must be holy to communion with God.

Holiness is prevalent throughout Scripture, but it's not always clear what it is. Many use the definition "set apart for God's use." That's probably the best short definition. But I also want to give you three distinctions for holiness:

1. Holiness means ethical, moral goodness. Holiness has something to do with pursuing justice, and treating others with compassion, and keeping yourself from sin.
2. Holiness is also a quality or property something has, like having the color green. So you'll not only see the priests as holy, but the clothes are consecrated, and the altar is atoned for. They're not ethically anything, but what's of concern is some quality we can't see. Often this quality is in greater degree the closer one gets to the presence of God.
3. Holiness is also a status of ownership by God. Holiness functions like the word "mine." When something is made holy, consecrated, it is identified as completely God's. Since everything is already God's, this means an ownership of God for God's use, like the priests and the altar.

So when God talks about them becoming holy there are at least these three things in mind.

Holiness is essential to communion with God because God is a holy God. And we are not. For there is a chasm of difference between God and man caused by sin. And sin is everywhere. What this Scripture highlights is that even the high priest Aaron can't escape the stain of sin. Remember this is the guy that helped lead the people out of Egypt. Brother of Moses. Mouthpiece of Moses. Yet not even Aaron could escape the stain of sin.

And so this consecration ceremony is meant to turn a person into a holy priest. To give them over to God and seek to remake them after the image of God.

Look with me at the end of the instructions in verse 30 and verse 35. The high priest is to wear the garments for seven days. The ordination process takes seven days. You see this consecration was a re-creation event, over seven days, symbolizing the seven days of creation. God is saying, if the priests want to serve me, they have to become a new creation. If you want to commune with God you must be a new creation.

But how? That's the second significance in the preparation.

Holiness requires blood.

Verses 10-28 give instructions for the sacrifices. Aaron and his sons would lay their hands on the head of the bull, signifying the bull taking the guilt of their sin, and then kill the bull; burning some on the altar and some out of the city. God says this is a sin offering.

The rams, likewise. They would lay their hands on the head and then kill the animal. The first is completely burnt up, but with the second some of the blood would cover Aaron's right ear, thumb, and big toe. Every part of him not covered in the garments. And the garments would also be sprinkled with blood. From head to toe he was covered. And in verse 33 we learn that this is for their atonement—the covering of their sin. Because sin keeps us from communion with the Father; keeps us from entering his presence.

It's only after the sin offering and after the blood has covered the tips of their ears to the tips of their feet do we find the declaration in 29:21, "He and his garments shall be holy."

Holiness is required if you desire to commune with God, but holiness requires blood. But you have to know that these rituals aren't magic. It's not like we could do all of this to someone here and make him into a priest. Holiness requires blood, but it's not the blood that makes one holy. Hebrews 10:3-4 reminds us, "But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." That's because it's not about what is done, but who is doing it. For holiness and communion with God rest on a promise.

PROMISE OF COMMUNION

Look with me at Exodus 29:42-46. God says: "It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God."

It has always been God who sanctifies, consecrates, and makes holy. The actions of an unholy people cannot make anything holy. The power for holiness comes from the one who promises communion. Sometimes we get the Old Testament wrong when we say that it was a religion of works. But we see that's not true. Now, they might have turned it into a religion of works, as even now we are prone to do. But we can see that originally communion with God rested on a promise.

When God chooses to do so, anything (or anyone), even Aaron, can be made holy; can be brought into communion with God. And this is the great irony of the whole passage today. While God is giving these instructions to Moses, concerning how Aaron and the priests will be made to facilitate Israel's communion with God, perhaps at the very moment God is giving these instructions on the mountain, Aaron is down below creating a golden calf and leading the people to a different God. At the same time God is instructing Moses of his design to communion with his people, those very people are seeking gods made of their own liking. Yet, the promise of communion with God remains.

God will fulfil his promise to meet with his people. He will take that idol-worshipping Aaron and consecrate him for the high priesthood. No matter what he's done, no matter how far he's turned away, he's never too far gone from God's promise of communion. And I hope you know that as well. That no matter how far you've chased worthless idols, and the pleasures of this world, the holy, glorious, and beautiful God desires to be with you. This Christmas may you take the opportunity to be led back into communion with him.

The high priest's job was to maintain the relationship between God and his people. To offer gifts and sacrifices to God for people's sin. To bear the names of the people before God that he would remember their covenant. To deal with the sin of Israel on the Day of Atonement. To enter the holy presence of God because Israel couldn't.

But the whole job of the priest rested on a promise from God to be with his people. And that promise wasn't fulfilled with Aaron. Because the high priest Aaron, is just a shadow and a copy of reality, just as the tabernacle itself is a shadow and copy of heaven.

The promise of communion with God came through the promise of a new and better high priest who would bring us into the Holy Place of God. This is what the New Testament book Hebrews describes for us.

The promise of communion is fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus—a high priest; like us, tempted in every way, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). A high priest who doesn't need to atone for himself before he can serve (Heb.7:26-27). For he was in himself the very holiness, glory, and beauty of God (Heb.1:3). A high priest who has entered into heaven itself, to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Heb. 9:24). A high priest who entered into the Holy Place, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by the means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption (9:11-12).

In chapter 10 the author of Hebrews says this: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”

If you consider Jesus your Lord, your high priest, then you also may have communion with God. You may put off your sin, and be clothed in the holiness of Christ. A new creation (Col. 3:10). A holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2). Called to lead others into communion with God through the blood of Christ. Gaining a confidence greater than the Israelites could ever have. That we can have communion with God, for we are united in Christ and washed by his blood.

Will you pray with me.

Father in heaven, may we draw near to you with a true heart in full assurance of faith. May our prayer be that of our song this morning, O come, O come Emmanuel: “O come our High Priest and intercede thy sacrifice, our only plea. The judgment we no longer fear. Thy precious blood has brought us near.” Father this morning give us confidence through the blood of your Son. And may we know your presence through your Messiah—Our Lord and King. Amen.