

• LESSON 7 (February 15) •

The Priesthood of the Tabernacle

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying,

“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” (Exo 19:1-6)

After delivering extensive instructions concerning the pattern of the tabernacle (Exo 25-27), the LORD began outlining to Moses the priesthood which would serve in and around his sanctuary.

“Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.” (Exo 28:1)

Beyond this family, an entire tribe of Israel was set apart by God for the ministry of the tabernacle.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at



Priest (kohen in Hebrew) means “one who officiates.” When God expressed his desire for Israel to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” what did he mean?

Who was Aaron? What do we know about him from Exodus?

the tabernacle. And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.”

(Num 3:5-10)

The tribe of Levi uniquely belonged to the LORD (Num 3:11-13). “For the LORD your God has chosen him out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the name of the LORD” (Deut 18:5).

“The Levitical priests, all the tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel. They shall eat the LORD’s food offerings as their inheritance. They shall have no inheritance among their brothers; the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them.” (Deut 18:1-2)

A tithing system was instituted by the LORD to provide for these priests and their families (Deut 18:3-8; 14:22-29). They rightly received a portion of food from various sacrifices presented to the LORD (Num 18:8-32). Forty-eight cities with their surrounding pasturelands were provided throughout the territories of Israel for the priests and their families (Josh 21). By the LORD’s design, these men did not have to concern themselves with many of the day-to-day tasks of ordinary life, but it is hard to overstate the seriousness of their ministry. They were to belong *wholly* to the LORD and his service.

So the LORD said to Aaron, “You and your sons and your father’s house with you shall bear iniquity connected with the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear iniquity connected with your priesthood. And with you bring your brothers also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may join you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony. They shall keep guard over you and over the whole tent, but shall not come near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar lest they, and you, die. They shall join you and keep guard over the tent of meeting for all the service of the tent,

What do you envision when you read that the Levites were expected to serve as “guards” of the tabernacle? Perhaps Exodus 32:25-29 and Numbers 25:1-13 would be helpful.

If you had to guess, why would the LORD institute that all the tribe of Levi “shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel”?

What was a tithe?

and no outsider shall come near you. And you shall keep guard over the sanctuary and over the altar, that there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel. And behold, I have taken your brothers the Levites from among the people of Israel. They are a gift to you, given to the LORD, to do the service of the tent of meeting. And you and your sons with you shall guard your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood as a gift, and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death.” (Lev 18:1-7)

The High Priest

At the head of the priesthood was the high priest.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. (Heb 5:1-4)

The high priest wore holy garments, for glory and for beauty (Exo 28:2).

- An **ephod** (Exo 28:6-14; 39:1-7) - a colorful linen torso garment held together by a skillfully woven waistband. It had two shoulder pieces, each holding an onyx stone. The names of the 12 sons of Israel were engraved on these two stones so that the high priest could bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance.
- A **breastpiece of judgment** (Exo 28:15-30; 39:8-21) - worn over the ephod and attached with gold chains and rings, the breastpiece had four rows, each with three precious stones. Each of the stones had engraved upon it the name of one of the tribes of Israel. The breastpiece also contained the Urim and the Thummim which appear to have been used in

Why would the LORD go so far as to say, “any outsider who comes near shall be put to death”?

In what way was even the high priest “beset with weakness”?



seeking guidance from the LORD (Num 27:21; 1 Sam 23:9-12; 28:6; 30:7-8; Ezra 2:63; Neh 7:65).

- A blue **robe** (Exo 28:31-35; 39:22-26) - worn under the ephod (Lev 8:7-8); imitation pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns with fine twined linen lined the hem of the robe, alternating with golden bells. “Its sound shall be heard when he goes into the Holy Place before the LORD, and when he comes out, so that he does not die” (Exo 28:35).
- A **coat** of fine linen (Exo 28:39; 39:27-29) - probably worn under the robe.
- A **sash** (Exo 28:39) embroidered with needlework.
- A **turban** of fine linen (Exo 28:36-39) - held a golden plate, the holy crown (Lev 8:9) on which were engraved in Hebrew, “Holy to the LORD.”

The rest of the priests wore coats and sashes and caps with linen undergarments (Exo 28:40-42). These special garments were to be “on Aaron and on his sons when they go into the tent of meeting or when they come near the altar to minister in the Holy Place, lest they bear guilt and die” (Exo 28:43).

POINTS TO PONDER:

- ❖ When men—even kings—did not respect God’s pattern for the priesthood, the consequences were serious (1 Sam 13:1-14; 2 Chron 26:16-21).
- ❖ Though these priests were many in number, they were only human. They lived only so long, and then they were prevented by death from continuing in office (Heb 7:23). The LORD spoke of succession from the very beginning of Aaron’s service (Exo 29:29-30). The writer of Hebrews reflects on this reality in drawing attention to the “better” priesthood of Jesus (Heb 7:23-28).

CLOSING THOUGHT: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

In contrast to “the former priests” who were “many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office,” Jesus is said to hold his priesthood “permanently, because he continues forever” (Heb 7:23-24). What does this mean?

“Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25). What should we take away from these truths as disciples of Jesus?

In your own words, what is Peter communicating in 1 Peter 2:9?