

LEVITICUS 8-10

Ordination of Priests





Leviticus 8:1-9

Focus Thoughts

The tent of God's presence was in the centre of the camp. Israelites huddled around holiness as they slept. Heaven's majesty rested on earth, utter purity lived among impurity, uncreatedness with fragile mortality. This was a rare community indeed. Yahweh surrounded by his children!

In the early chapters of Leviticus, the LORD had called out, speaking from the tabernacle on nine occasions (1:1, 4:1, 5:14, 6:1, 8, 19, 24, 7:22, 28). This tenth time however was different (8:1). Now Moses assembled the entire congregation, a vast multitude of people. He ushered his older brother Aaron to the front of the meeting, as well as Aaron's sons. And for the first time, at the tent of meeting, a remarkable ritual is performed – the consecration of the priests. This is the first narrative passage in the book. With it we have moved from words to events, from instruction to action.

If the idea of holiness has largely perished from our imaginations in modern secular societies, then the significance of priesthood is also bound to be hazy. Without it, we can have no clarity regarding scripture, no certainty concerning the gospel, and no confidence about the privileges and responsibilities we share in the twenty-first century.

What did priests do? They were mediators, standing in that vast gap between a holy God and fallen humans. After Israel's exodus, priesthood became crucial. In the broadest sense, every Israelite was a priest. The nation stood in the gap between the holy God and all other peoples throughout the world.⁸ However more specifically, within Israel, just one tribe, the tribe of Levi, represented the rest before the LORD. And even more specifically again, from the tribe of Levi, males born to the family of Aaron the brother of Moses, became priests representing their tribe. Finally, in a very special way, Aaron himself stood as the singular representative, the High Priest, the one who dared enter the Holy of Holies once a year sprinkling blood on the Ark of the Covenant for the sins of the nation. Israel as a nation . Levites . Aaron's sons . Aaron himself . these were the multiple levels of the priesthood. And such a priesthood was essential if the unique and holy God was to live among and walk with this less than perfect nation.

What did the priests do? Many things. They taught the law, helped Israel make distinctions between things that were clean or unclean, brought down judgments when people argued, led Israel's armies into battle, and most importantly, offered sacrifices day after day at the tabernacle. They stood between Yahweh and his people. They had great privilege and high responsibility. And for this reason, their entire lives – everything about them – had to be holy.

So we read that as Aaron and his sons were set apart, they were washed. They were publicly cleansed for ministry (8:6). Then Aaron was dressed in garments of glory and beauty, described when they were being made, as holy garments.⁹ On his head was placed a turban, a holy crown with a golden plate on the front engraved "Holy to the LORD."¹⁰ In a later passage from Leviticus we are told that the priests had to be physically unblemished. None who were blind or lame, or who had a mutilated face or a limb too long, or an injured foot or hand, no hunchbacks or dwarfs, none with disease or imperfection of any sort, could fulfill this role.¹¹ Moreover, the priests were expected to live exemplary lives. It was imperative that they loved the LORD with



all their heart. These were holy people dressed in holy clothing to perform holy tasks. Both morally and symbolically, the priests were to represent a perfected, cleansed humanity.

Jesus Christ became our High Priest. Fully human, he was tempted as we are and yet remained sinless. As our representative, he brought the sacrifice of his own life. He was raised from death. He passed through the heavens into the very presence of God to rule the universe. And we must understand that when fallen humans, such as we are, trust in Christ, the New Testament authors indicate that we also become priests of God – we become “a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”¹² We, like Aaron and the Levites of old, but in far greater measure as “in Christ” people, stand in the gap between the holy God and the nations of our day. What a privilege!

There are many ways to conceive of education. One is in terms of preparing young people for priesthood – not in the sense that they will withdraw from the world to dwell in secluded monasteries – rather that they will live as holy representatives for the LORD in all spheres of life, in business and sport, in families and business, in government and entertainment. This is a high and holy calling. May we understand our educational task in such terms as we go about our work today. And may our students stand in the gap.

Prayer

LORD God, you have called us to be your priests in Christ. We cannot comprehend the privilege and responsibility of that calling! Today, we ask you to fill us with your Holy Spirit. Make us truly holy in word and deed. And we ask that we may inspire a new generation to also stand in the gap in our times and places – as holy people of vision and conviction with the fire of the Holy Spirit burning in their hearts and renewing their minds. Lord, sanctify our work for you this day we pray. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Further Thoughts

Tabernacle and Priesthood – from Shadows to Substance

The author of Hebrews speaks of OT realities such as the Tabernacle and the Priesthood as shadows of a more substantial reality – of a substance that has now come into being through the gospel of Christ. One commentator on Hebrews illustrates this understanding as follows:

The taxi driver was resigned to things being this way for a long time. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘we’ve just got to put up with it. Boston will be a great city if they ever get it finished.’

We were stuck in what seemed like an impenetrable traffic jam, going from Logan Airport, out by the Atlantic ocean, to the apartment we had rented in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just inland from Boston itself. One of the largest construction projects ever was taking place right in our path, designed to create a whole new road system which would enable traffic to flow smoothly not only between the airport and the city but also between other towns to the north and south.

I realized at that moment – it had never occurred to me before – that for the entire duration of such a project, in this case several years if not decades, alternative arrangements had to be made to enable the traffic to get through, as well as it could, while the building was in process. ... when you redesign a major part of a city, ordinary life has to go on. People have to get to



work. In addition to the eventual plan, therefore – the great design in the mind of the planners and somewhere no doubt in a model under a glass case in City Hall – there have to exist all sorts of preparatory and intermediate plans. While the work is going on, they will need to build extra temporary roads going this way and that, which they will then demolish when the final stage is complete. No doubt this work, too, subdivides into several stages. People like me, living there for just a few months, only ever knew the temporary stage. I never saw the final plan, even as a model or a map.

... God has all along had a master plan for how the world would be put to rights. He has envisaged from the beginning the way in which the wickedness and frailty of his human creatures would be dealt with, so that the entire world, like the city of Boston in the minds of the planners, could be 'put into proper order' (verse 10). ... Temporary arrangements have to be made to keep things flowing, to regulate ongoing human life, until the appointed time.¹³

The Tabernacle and the Priesthood were significant, historical realities in their day. Both however, pointed beyond themselves to a greater reality, a more substantial one, which we now have in the gospel of Christ Jesus. In the full light of his 'once-for-all' death, resurrection and rule, we now understand how temporary they were.

Leviticus 10:1-7

Focus Thoughts

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis, we hear the following conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Beaver and Lucy:

"Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and make no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" asked Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver, "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."¹⁴

Aslan was good – but not safe. He was not mere niceness, not mediocrity, not mildness. He was threateningly good, confrontingly pure. There was no room for carelessness or complete ease around this majestic king of Narnia, an imaginative representation of the holy Son of God, Jesus Christ.



But ours is an era of carelessness, of complacency. We have narrowed, perhaps even eradicated, the gap between the majestic and the common, the magnificent and the mundane, the awesome and the ordinary. Indeed, superlative terms such as “awesome” are readily flung around as descriptors of a new pair of running shoes or a two minute song with meaningless lyrics and a catchy beat. Mediocre achievements are roundly encouraged with sugary acclaim: “That was awesome!” And being human is often understood as just being nice, being inoffensive and above all, making no decisive judgments. The Bible does not lend its support to a world where the gap between black and white, good and evil, what is truly awesome and what is sadly lacking, is no longer recognised. In reality, not all is grey. There are successes and failures, triumphs and tragedies, holiness and evil. Nadab and Abihu discovered this to be the case.

Their names are perhaps unknown. However, these were two young men of considerable privilege. Nadab was the first born son of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Abihu, as Aaron’s second born son, was next in line after Nadab to succeed Aaron as Israel’s High Priest. They knew of holiness. They had been with Moses on Sinai. They had been near Yahweh, separated only by what is described as “a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.”¹⁵ With Moses and 70 others, they had eaten and drunk in Yahweh’s presence. They had been as close to God as any human except Moses.

Then they had been with Aaron when he fashioned the golden calf. They were complicit in the idolatry and the revelry. They had heard the fury of Moses and perhaps were shaken by the shattered stone tablets. They witnessed the slaughter and then the plague. They knew of holiness. They knew both the glory and the wrath of holiness.

The passage in Leviticus 10 tells of the first day of a new era, a day of high privilege. Nadab and Abihu had joined with their father in being ordained as priests of Yahweh. Fire consumed the burnt offering. Glory shone all around. The people shouted and fell down. The LORD was present. It was truly an awesome day at the gate of the tent. Then the unthinkable. Was it carelessness or outright disobedience that caused these sons of Aaron to burn incense on “unauthorised” fire – literally “alien” or “strange” fire? Did they gather coals from the wrong place? We are not sure, however at the gate of the tent, Yahweh’s anger burned. And Yahweh turned. Dressed in their holy robes, Nadab and Abihu were incinerated. The LORD uttered these words of warning: “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.” Aaron held his peace. His sons were carried away, their smoldering bodies buried outside the camp.

The holy God can only be approached on his terms. And so the author of Hebrews, celebrating the finished work of Christ our holy High Priest, writes: “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.”¹⁶ We can approach! Through Christ, we can draw near. There is nothing to fear for those who are in Christ. May we lead young people into a new understanding of holiness. And like us, may they come near to the uniquely awesome God through their faith in Jesus Christ.



Prayer

Father God, we are shocked as we read of Nadab and Abihu. And we don't understand because we know that daily we take you for granted. We too are careless and complacent and downright disobedient, and yet you are merciful to us. Thank you for Jesus. We have not understood the greatness of grace because we have not comprehended the majesty of holiness. LORD, give us eyes to see your holiness. And give us hearts of gratitude for your grace. And today, may we draw near in full assurance with clean hearts, to serve you. Guide us in our work we pray. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Further Thoughts

“Many truths ... or ... No truth”

What is truth? What is error? Who can say in an era when “relativism” has become a widely accepted theory of knowing. Relativism has been defined as “the theory of knowledge or ethics which holds that criteria of judgment are relative, varying with the individual, time, and circumstance.”¹⁷ Everything is only relatively true or good or beautiful – depending on a person's point of view. Beauty is only in the eye of the beholder. Truth is what you make it. If young people in our times and places are to pursue lives characterised by holiness, they are going to need to determine the real nature of truth, goodness and beauty.

Historian Arnold Toynbee wrote a study of the rise and fall of civilisations. He determined that great societies were seldom overwhelmed or destroyed by other civilisations. Rather, they committed a kind of cultural suicide. He described a number of characteristics of cultural suicide, calling one of them “promiscuity.” He did not mean this in the sense of rampant sexual immorality, rather “the indiscriminate acceptance of anything and everything ... an act of self-surrender to the melting pot ... in Religion and Literature and Language and Art as well as ... Manners and Customs, the triumph of a mass mind.”¹⁸

As educators and parents in the twenty-first century, one of the most important things we can do for young people is teach them a way of discerning the real foundations for holy living and of appreciating what is good and true and beautiful.

⁸See Exodus 19:1-6

⁹See Exodus 28:2 and 29:29

¹⁰See Exodus 28:36

¹¹See Leviticus 21

¹²1 Peter 2:9-10

¹³Wright, N. T. (2004). *Hebrews for Everyone*. London, UK: SPCK. Pp. 90-91

¹⁴Extract from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

¹⁵Exodus 24:9-11

¹⁶Hebrews 10:22-23

¹⁷Dickson, J. “My truth/Your truth” in Smart, S. (2007). *A Spectator's Guide to Worldviews: Ten Ways of Understanding Life*. Sydney South, Australia, Blue Bottle. P. 174

¹⁸The thoughts and quotations in this paragraph are taken from Dickson, J. “My truth/Your truth” in Smart, S. (2007). *A Spectator's Guide to Worldviews: Ten Ways of Understanding Life*. Sydney South, Australia, Blue Bottle. P. 188