

Sermon 100, You've Got Your Hands Full, Pt. 2, Exodus 29

Proposition: The priests and the altar were set apart for the work of maintaining God's presence through sacrificial blood and the holy anointing oil.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we looked last time at the items that were needed to consecrate priests, and talked in a general way about the clothing and anointing that went on in the ceremony. This week we're going to look at that in more detail

A. Offer the Requisite Offerings, vv. 10-25

The second stage of the ordination/consecration process is to offer the offerings that are described here. They are a bull, two rams, and the bread that was listed at the beginning of the chapter in the materials list.

1. Bull for a Sin Offering, vv. 10-14

The first animal to go under the knife is a bull, which must be slaughtered in the ritually correct manner to be a sin offering. This offering sees the best parts of the bull burned up for the LORD while the rest is carried away (like sin) and disposed of in the wilderness, "outside the camp." The blood is handled in a special manner to indicate cleansing from sin.

2. Ram for a Burnt Offering, vv. 15-18

The second offering is the burnt offering; the whole thing was to be burned up in the camp, right on top of the altar of burnt offering. If the first one symbolized that sin is cleansed by blood, and also that sin has to be carried outside the camp and disposed of, this second offering signifies that you and I must devote our entire lives to God. Just as the whole animal is burned, so the whole person is given to God. When I offer a burnt offering, I am saying “God, this whole thing is yours, and I am totally yours as well. My whole being and life is for your service.”

3. Ram & Bread for Heave Offering, vv. 19-25

The final sort of offering presented is a heave offering. The two different kinds of bread (risen loaves and flat bread, or ‘matzoh’) are to be “waved” before the LORD, either with an up-and-down motion or a back-and-forth motion. It’s hard to know precisely what sort of motion this is. What’s more important is that the dead animals, other than a few choice portions burned up for the LORD, were available for the priests to eat. This offering, in other words, is not just about reckoning with past sin, but about providing for the future of the relationship.

So why all the offerings? Because under the law everything was cleansed with blood. The people of Israel were being shown that true priesthood requires real, costly, bloody sacrifice. You can’t ordain a priest for \$10 and a chicken. You have to give the most expensive, valuable animals, rams and bulls. You have to spend a lot of money to get a priest. I don’t know much about today’s livestock markets, but let’s just say for the sake of illustration that an unblemished bull brings \$2000 at the livestock sale, and an unblemished ram half of that. To ordain a priest over a seven-day ritual like the one described would cost \$28,000 in livestock alone, and thousands more for the hand-tailored robes, the bread, the fuel sufficient to burn up all the burnt offerings, and the expensive anointing oil.

Sacrifice costs time, effort, and money, as well as requiring a spiritual identification with (laying your hands on the head of) the animal that you then slaughter. Ordination is not a painless process, and neither is priestly worship.

B. Cleanse them with Blood, vv. 10-25

The blood marks the extremities of Aaron and his sons, thus implying that it covers their whole bodies. They are cleansed with the blood, and anointed with the oil (whose recipe will be given in the next chapter). The blood washed away sin by saying “This sin has been paid for. The penalty has been exacted out of the hide of an innocent lamb.”

C. Anoint them with the Anointing Oil, v. 21

The priests were also to receive the anointing oil. This was a sign and a seal of their calling to be priests to Yahweh. Physically speaking, it marked them with His special smell. We’re going to talk more about that in a few weeks, but suffice it to say that holiness leaves a mark in this world. One mark of holiness is that you smell holy, like the holy tabernacle in which you minister. Smelling like Yahweh’s private scent is a good way of signifying that you are set apart for Yahweh’s private purposes.

D. Provide for the Future of the Priesthood, vv. 26-34

The ceremony culminates with the priests eating from this final sacrifice, the wave offering. A skeptic sees in this the mark of fakery. “Ah ha! The clever priests have figured out how to trick

the others into feeding them for nothing.” The devout man sees the mark of God’s faithfulness here. Though the ceremony is for Him, and the animal is offered to Him, He gives part of it away to feed His servants the priests. From His largesses He generously gives away what is needed to care for those who protect His residence with His people.

1. Bread, Breast & Thigh to Feed the Priests, vv. 26-28, 31-34

Thus, notice how God takes time, in describing the ordination ritual, to mention “Here’s the cut of meat that you personally get to eat/share with your family, Moses.”

Of all the verses in this chapter, this one (26) makes my jaw drop. In Latin class, we learned the Roman proverb *Magna di curant, parva neglegunt* — the gods take care of great things and neglect small things. That may be true of the false gods of the Roman state. But it is emphatically not true of the living God. He has great things on His mind — the master plan for the tabernacle, the complicated ritual of priestly ordination. And yet, in the press of business, He does not forget or overlook the all-too-human needs of His people. Wow. This makes me want to bow down and worship Him. He provides juicy cuts for those who serve Him!

But not only does God provide for Moses in the act of ordination. He provides in an ongoing way for the priests to eat. The breast and the thigh from the ram are to be taken and cooked in a holy place — that is, presumably, inside the tabernacle courtyard. And then Aaron and his sons eat the food in front of the doorway of the tent of meeting. God provides. God does not expect His servants to serve Him for nothing. He knows that we have physical needs and He takes care of them.

Along those lines, I just want to say that you all are an amazing example of this. I am very well cared for by the church. My physical needs are met; as you know, I have five children, but I don’t feel that they are deprived or missing out on the finer experiences of life like food, clothing, and shelter. They have what they need. And that is because of the generosity of you, God’s people, which in turn can be traced back to our Heavenly Father’s generosity.

God looks to the future and the ongoing institution of the priesthood in Israel. Just as He provided bread for His Son at the last supper, so He provided bread and meat for these priests who officiated in the Tabernacle’s worship.

Why was the extra food burned? To indicate that it belonged to God. Like the manna, it was not to be kept overnight. It was to be eaten at the time, with the rest going as a burnt offering back to Yahweh who gave it.

2. Robes of Office to be Passed Down, vv. 29-30

The other thing that God provided is that the priestly robes would be passed down. Israel would never be without a priest. Now, that said, Hosea later announced a judgment on Israel because of their whoredom: “For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods.” But this judgment is not to be permanent: “Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days” (Hos 3:4-5 ESV). The second verse quoted (Hos 3:5) does not follow up on the children of Israel doing without sacrifice and ephod — the two major accouterments of priesthood. But we should

understand, do in fact understand, that when David the King is restored, He will serve as priest too. Hence the enigmatic note in 2 Sam 8 that “David’s sons were priests.” Solomon and his brothers may not have been priests, but the great and final Son of David most certainly is.

E. Perform the Ordination Ceremony for Seven Days, v. 35

The ceremony took seven days. It took a week to create the world; it took a week to make a priest. New creation symbolism, anybody? It’s all over this book of Exodus.

II. How to Consecrate an Altar, vv. 36-37

Well, it is not enough to prepare the priests. Moses is also charged with preparing the altar. It too has to be set apart, consecrated for the holy purpose of hosting sacrifices to Yahweh.

A. Purify it with Sin Offerings, v. 36

The first step is to purify it with a sin offerings. Note that all of these actions are repeated through a whole seven-day cycle. As it takes a week to make the world, so it takes a week to make the priest holy and a week to make the priest’s major tool, the altar, holy. The altar is stained and polluted with sin. That’s why it needs sin offerings to cleanse it. The wickedness of humanity has stained even our wood-and-bronze boxes. When you hear that sin is in the fabric of this world, that’s true. It’s not there as something originally created, but as something that was ground in afterwards by us wicked human beings.

B. Consecrate it with Anointing Oil, vv. 36b-37

The altar not only needs to be moved from profane to common by the application of sin offering blood. It also needs to be anointed with the holy anointing oil — indicating that in a certain sense, it shares in the vocation of the priest (as does the whole tabernacle). As the priest smells like Yahweh’s private smell, so does the altar. It is His, and His alone. We can also see that Christ, our great high priest, is sacrifice and altar, priest and victim. That’s why everything had to be anointed — because it all pointed to the Anointed One!

C. Don’t Let Anything Unholy Touch It, v. 37

Finally, once the altar has been purified, anointed, and consecrated, it is not to be touched by anything unholy. The same goes, of course, for the priests, though those regulations are not mentioned in this chapter.

When you are holy to the Lord, you may not go rub yourself in the world’s profane filth. I’m talking about music videos, TV shows, and the more overtly sinful sexual, financial, and relational habits in which the world indulges. Don’t do that. I shouldn’t do it, you shouldn’t do it, and the Levitical priests weren’t to do it. To be a holy priest to God means that you should avoid all that is profane and impure. Don’t touch it — that is, don’t participate in it as producer, consumer, salesman, or anything else. This does not mean that you can’t talk to sinners. But if you are involved in the sin, you are violating your priesthood.

III. What Priests and Altar Are For, vv. 38-46

As I already mentioned, this chapter is moving toward the practical. What is the altar for? What are the priests for? The LORD mentions five things that priests and altar are called to do.

A. Daily Burnt Offering, vv. 38-41

Their first task is to offer the daily burnt offering, continuously. This is a “forever” sacrifice, happening day after day after day. The positive interpretation is that God has provided for His people forever in an ongoing act of worship that continuously rededicates Israel to Him and His service. The negative interpretation, advanced by the epistle to the Hebrews, is that this offering didn’t actually work — it did not perfect those who offered, which is why it had to be done over and over again. Both interpretations are true. God provided this sacrifice to constantly rededicate His people. But the fact that they needed to be rededicated every morning and every evening meant that the sacrifice did not do everything needed once for all.

In a certain sense, brothers and sisters, we are here face to face with the mystery of time and eternity. In case you haven’t noticed, the world is made for a daily round, a cycle in which today is like tomorrow is like yesterday. Spring, summer, fall, winter, do it all over again. Morning, evening, morning, evening. Breakfast today, breakfast tomorrow. The fact of the matter is that every human activity is constantly repeated. Even something you do once-for-all, like writing a book, requires the book to be constantly reread to stay alive in human consciousness and memory. You can never grow enough food in one year to last for your whole lifetime — nor would you want to.

Eternity, the eschatological, is different. With the coming of Christ the eternal has broken into time. The once-for-all has met with the daily round. The endlessly repeated cycle has ground to a halt, or at least, is grinding to a halt. Instead of the daily sacrifice, we have a once-for-all sacrifice, celebrated and eaten from on a daily and weekly basis in the ongoing life of the church.

Anyway, the OT system smelled strongly of this world. It was repeated every day, just as our worship is repeated every week. But our worship is a little different, because we do not offer a sacrifice anymore. We are still living on the wealth of the one, once-for-all sacrifice.

B. Meeting with God, vv. 42-43

Here is the second thing the priests and the worship they led was for: to facilitate meeting with God. God would come and speak with Moses, with the priests, and ultimately with all the sons of Israel. At the doorway, He would communicate with His people.

Man lives on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. We already noted how God provides a choice cut of meat for Moses. Now we see that the tabernacle is the place of revelation — as, indeed, pretty much the whole book of Leviticus is said to be spoken by God from the door of the tabernacle.

C. Demonstrating that God Is the Ultimate Consecrator, vv. 43-44

The priests and tabernacle also did something passively: they demonstrated God’s prowess as the ultimate consecrator. We just read nearly forty verses of instructions on how to consecrate. But the Lord adds here that the tabernacle will be made holy primarily and ultimately by the residence of His glory within it.

The same is true today. I can get you wet and pronounce the baptismal formula over you. But only Jesus can baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Only He can come and dwell within you. And when He does, He will show Himself to be the ultimate consecrator.

D. To Provide for God’s Dwelling Among His People, v. 45

Another purpose of the priesthood and the whole tabernacle institution was to make provision for God's dwelling among His people. He did not dwell as a homeless person; He had a custom tent made, with custom personnel to service it.

You and I are priests. That means that we are called to facilitate God's dwelling among us today. We are called to live the holy lives, not quenching or grieving His Spirit, that ensure His continued residence among us.

E. To Teach Us Who Yahweh Is, v. 46

Finally, as we have talked about many times over the last 98 sermons, the overall point is this: to teach God's people who He is. From Pharaoh's arrogant challenge "Who is the LORD? I do not know Yahweh" to this moment, God has shown exactly who He is. The construction of the tabernacle teaches us this: He is Yahweh, He is our God, He brought us out of Egypt for the purpose of dwelling among us as one of us, and again, He is Yahweh.

The tabernacle, like the book of Exodus, is about knowing God.

Do you know Him? Do you recognize your great high priest in all of this material on consecrating and ordaining priests?

Brothers and sisters, this stuff is relevant to us because we have such a high priest. He has His hands full, because He's got the whole world in His hands. He is busy consecrating all of it to His Father, making it holy, bringing about the day when Eden will cover the earth and it will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. His hands are full, but He knows our name, feeds us, and continually reveals the Father to us as our prophet even while interceding for us as our priest and reigning over us as our king.

There is no ordination without call to a definite work. The son of David has been called to the work of saving the world. See Him and know that the Father is all about saving the world, and that's why He's put His Son on it. It will happen; the kingdom will come. Wait, hope, and worship. Amen.