

# The Priestly Garments of Grace



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Exod. 32:1–6; Lev. 21:7–22:8; Exodus 28; Rev. 21:12–14; Heb. 4:14, 15.*

**Memory Text:** “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (*1 Peter 2:9*).

One great theme from the Protestant Reformation is that which has been called “the priesthood of all believers,” the idea—derived especially (but not solely) from the above text—that all Christians function as priests before God, and that, because they have Jesus, they don’t need earthly mediators (as in some religious systems) between themselves and the Lord. “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (*1 Tim. 2:5*).

After the life, death, resurrection, and high priestly ministry of Jesus, the old Hebrew system that God had initiated was fulfilled in Christ. The Levitical priesthood has been replaced and a new order established, one in which we all are part of the “royal priesthood.”

This week, as we study the garments worn by the priests in the old system, we can learn a bit about what it means to be priests in the new.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 30.*

## Old Covenant Grace

Jesus said it about as clearly as human language could express it: “ ‘From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked’ ” (*Luke 12:48, NIV*). It’s a powerful principle, one that we as Adventists, with all that we have been given (and we have been given *so much!*), would do well to take seriously. Just compare the truths we have been given with some of the other doctrines out there (eternal torment in hell, Sabbath changed to Sunday, 144,000 Jewish virgins preaching the gospel when the church is secretly raptured during the reign of the antichrist) in order to understand all with which we have been entrusted.

Hence this principle makes the sin of Aaron and the golden calf that much worse.

**Read** Exodus 32:1–6. What possible excuse could Aaron have had for partaking in this flagrant apostasy?

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The apostasy itself was bad enough, but that Aaron acquiesced to it seems even more incredible. Think about all with which Aaron had been privileged. Aaron was right there with Moses from the start (*Exod. 4:27–30*); Aaron was Moses’ spokesman before Pharaoh (*Exod. 7:1*); Aaron cast down the rod that became a serpent (*vs. 10*); Aaron smote the waters that turned to blood (*vs. 20*); and Aaron was part of a select few who were able to approach the Lord in a very special way (*Exod. 24:9, 10*). In short, the man had been given privileges that few in history ever had, and yet, when a great test came, he failed miserably.

But here’s the amazing thing, God not only forgave Aaron his sin, the Lord eventually allowed Aaron to wear the sacred garments as the covenant nation’s first high priest, a type for the high priestly ministry of Jesus Himself (*Heb. 8:1*). In other words, although Aaron was guilty of a terrible sin himself, he was also the recipient of God’s redeeming grace; grace so great that it not only forgave him but allowed Aaron to assume a sacred office that, at its core, is all about God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness. Thus, Aaron’s life is a special example of mercy and redemption available to all in Christ.

**Have you ever failed, even miserably, to live up to what you have been given? How can you get hope from Aaron’s example that all is not lost, even despite your mistakes?**

## *The Lesson in Brief*

► **Key Text:** *1 Peter 2:9*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Recognize aspects of God’s provisions for us, and the illustration of His character, in the priestly role of Aaron and the clothing of his office.

**Feel:** Nurture a sense of the holiness and purity God calls us to have as His royal priesthood and holy nation.

**Do:** Accept Christ as our High Priest and take advantage of His provisions for forgiving us, cleansing us, and enabling us to live a holy life.

► **Learning Outline:**

### **I. Know: In the Steps of Priestly Royalty**

**A** How does Aaron’s role as priest reflect Jesus and His priestly royal ministry to us today?

**B** How did Aaron’s garments and breastplate illustrate God’s role for Israel as His representative among the nations, as well as Christ’s role as high priest?

### **II. Feel: Pure and Holy**

**A** How was Aaron to represent God’s glory and beauty?

**B** What emotions were called forth as a result of witnessing the richness and splendor of his high priestly garb?

### **III. Do: Christ, Our High Priest**

**A** What are we called to do in response to Christ’s ministry as High Priest?

**B** What must we depend on Christ to do for us?

**C** How are we, as royal priests and a holy nation, to represent God’s glory, holiness, and perfection today?

► **Summary:** Aaron’s priestly role and garments illustrate the role Christ has played as One “tempted as we are,” bearing our sins but also connecting us to the pure and holy perfection of God.

## The Priesthood

**“And take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office, even Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron’s sons”** (*Exod. 28:1*).

The Levitical priesthood was established during the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel (*see Gen. 14:18*) and was to last more than fifteen hundred years. Although the concept of a priesthood to the Lord had already long existed, the establishment of the Levitical priesthood provided a clearer view of its role.

As we saw yesterday, despite the enormity of his sin, Aaron was chosen by the Lord to become the first head of this new priesthood. This shows that the priests needed to be able to relate to the people whom they represented before God, because that was exactly what they were doing: acting as representatives, mediators between fallen humanity and a holy God. Aaron, as a fallen human being, easily could relate to the fallen human beings whom he was to represent. Who would he be to judge others in their sin when he was hardly innocent himself?

At the same time, the priesthood was a sacred honor, and the priests were to represent holiness and purity. After all, they were the ones who were standing before the Lord in place of the people. They had to be “holy”; otherwise, what was the point of a priesthood? They had to be different, not in an arbitrary way (different just to be different) but different in a sacred sense, a sense that would—while acknowledging their closeness to those whom they were representing—clearly differentiate them from the masses as a whole.

**What** were some of the things required of the priests, and what do you think these things were to represent? *Lev. 21:7–22:8*.

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However difficult some of these concepts are for us to grasp today, the idea nevertheless should be clear: the priesthood was to be something different, sacred, and special. Priests were symbols of Jesus, and their work was to symbolize, in shadows and types, what Jesus would do in our behalf.

**Should we be different from the world around us? If so, why, and in what ways?**

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** The priests of the Old Testament era were a distinct class of people specially dedicated to God. They could easily be identified by their unique, symbolic garments. As Christians, we are also priests in a very real sense and should be recognizable by the work of Christ within us.

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize the parallel between the special garments worn by the priests to serve before God and the figurative robes of Christ’s righteousness that allow us to come before God in our state as sinful humans.

In 1972, journalist David Halberstam published *The Best and the Brightest*, a book on the architects of U.S. policy in Vietnam in the early 1960s. The title of Halberstam’s book referred to the fact that these individuals had received the best education in the best institutions of higher learning, and most had achieved—prior to their involvement in the emerging U.S. Vietnam strategy—notable successes and triumphs in business, government, and academia. Why then, Halberstam asked, did the policies they formulated and put into place prove to be disastrous?

If you look at biblical history, God rarely chooses the “best and the brightest.” And when the “best and the brightest” do stumble into the sacred story, they often prove not to be so bright and good after all. Examples include King Saul, Judas, and Solomon. His best servants often don’t start out so well. Moses committed murder on impulse, fled into the desert, and tried to talk his way out of his mission. Jonah fled in the opposite direction to avoid confronting his own fear and bigotry. Paul was a persecutor and an enabler of mob violence.

None of us are the “best and brightest.” And if we are, it’s only because the standards are so low. God’s royal priesthood is made up of repentant sinners and recovering “best and brightest” who realize that they need the garments of Christ’s grace and righteousness.

**Discuss With the Class:** What does it mean that we as Christians are, in a very real sense, priests of God? How should this affect our views of ourselves and our places in the world?

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## Priestly Garments

**“And these are the garments which they shall make; a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a brodered coat, a mitre, and a girdle: and they shall make holy garments for Aaron thy brother, and his sons, that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office” (Exod. 28:4).**

As one studies the earthly sanctuary model, it should be clear that nothing was left to chance. God gave the priests explicit instructions regarding what was to be done. This also is apparent when it came to the garments that the priests were to wear. Everything was done according to exact instructions.

**Read Exodus 28, the description of the clothing that was to be made for Aaron, the high priest, and for the priests in general. Without getting caught up in intricate details, what general spiritual lessons can we take from what is being presented here?**

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“The pattern of the priestly robes was made known to Moses in the mount. Every article the high priest was to wear, and the way it should be made, were specified. These garments were consecrated to a most solemn purpose. By them was represented the character of the great antitype, Jesus Christ. They covered the priest with glory and beauty, and made the dignity of his office to appear. When clothed with them, the priest presented himself as a representative of Israel, showing by his garments the glory that Israel should reveal to the world as the chosen people of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Youth’s Instructor*, June 7, 1900.

A great deal has been written over the centuries about the supposed meaning and symbolism of each color and fabric and stone and chain and the like. Whatever their individual meanings, together they represented the perfection and holiness and beauty and dignity of “the great Antitype,” Jesus our true High Priest who ministers in the sanctuary in heaven (*Heb. 8:1, 2*).

Notice, too, in the texts, the idea of the priests *bearing* various things (*Exod. 28:12, 29, 30, 38, 42*). This, of course, is a crucial theme in the whole plan of salvation, which the priesthood and sanctuary symbolized—the idea of Jesus, our Substitute, bearing in Himself our sins and taking upon Himself the punishment for them. All of this was foreshadowed through the sanctuary service and the clothing of the priests, filled with symbolism that represented the character and work of Jesus in our behalf.

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED► **STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** Attempt to draw parallels between the duties and roles of the priests of Old Testament times and our roles and functions as members of the church.

## Bible Commentary

I. “**Priest of the Most High God . . .**” (*Review Genesis 14:18–20 with your class.*)

The episode recounted in Genesis 14:18–20 is one of the most intriguing in the Old Testament. Who was Melchizedek? Where did he come from? What was the nature of the primordial priesthood which he apparently represented, one that predated the Levitical priesthood with which we are mostly concerned?

Melchizedek’s name tells us a lot about him. Its Semitic roots literally mean “sacred [or righteous] king.” He is described as a king, as well as a priest, and he reigns in Salem, which most scholars identify with Jerusalem. Christians, from the author of Hebrews (7:1–3) on, tend to implicitly identify him with Christ. After all, only Christ is truly worthy of being described as a holy or sacred king. Kingship among the Israelites was intended to be exercised under the authority of God, but rarely was. There is no parallel in the biblical tradition for regarding a human king as a demigod, as there was among neighboring peoples in the ancient world. Even David, who was regarded as a type of the Messiah, could not have been described as particularly holy. Yet Melchizedek, as Christ, was a “sacred king.”

Also, Melchizedek was “king of [the city of] Salem,” which literally meant “king of peace.” That parallels quite well with “prince of peace,” another appellation of Christ.

It is also interesting to note that, while we typically assume that worship of the true God did not exist at that time (apart from Abraham) Melchizedek’s presence refutes this assumption. Melchizedek had nothing whatsoever to do with Abraham or his lineage; yet, somehow, Abraham knew who he was and recognized his authority.

**Consider This:** In Hebrews 7:3, Melchizedek is described as being free of human attachments. There was nothing about him that could be attributed to human lineage, origin, or achievement. What does this say

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## Breastplate of Judgment

Of all the vestments worn by the priests, the breastplate of judgment (*Exod. 28:15*) to be worn by the high priest was the most elaborate and intricate. The other garments were more like a backdrop to this sacred part of the priestly vestment. Considerable time, about one-third of the chapter (*Exod. 28:15–30*), is spent describing the construction of this sacred ornament. That alone should indicate something of just how central and important it was to the ministry of the priests in the sanctuary.

**Read** Exodus 28:15–30. What are the meanings of the different stones? What does it mean that the priest would “bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart”? *Vs. 29, NIV; see also Rev. 21:12–14.*

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Here, in a unique way, we see again the theme of the priest, a symbol of Jesus, bearing His people. The Hebrew word there for “bear” is a common word in the Old Testament for the bearing of sin, something that the priests would do as part of their ministry (*Lev. 10:17; Exod. 28:38; Num. 18:1, 22*). Now, though, it’s used in the context of the priest bearing the names of Israel; although the immediate context is somewhat different, the idea is still there: God’s people must be completely dependent upon the Lord, who forgives them, who sustains them, and who offers them the power to live the holy lives that He demands from His people (*Phil. 4:13*).

Notice, too, where the priest bears the names of the people. Upon his heart. The text specifically mentions this location, a common symbol in the Bible (and in many cultures) that reveals the love and tender care that the Lord has for His children.

Another important point is that each tribe had a different gem, each with different qualities, to symbolize the distinctiveness of each tribe (*see Genesis 49*). Commentators have seen this as a way to point out the distinctive differences and traits, not just in the twelve tribes, nor just in the Twelve Apostles (*Rev. 21:14*), but in the church as a whole, which is made of various “living stones” (*1 Pet. 2:5, NIV*). No matter how different we all are in personality, character, and gifts, we are still to be united in purpose under the grace and Lordship of our great High Priest, Jesus.

**How have you personally experienced the love of God? How has He shown you that He has you near His heart? Why is it important to dwell on those experiences, and how can you draw strength from them, especially in times of trial?**



*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

about our salvation and our incorporation into Christ’s royal priesthood, known as the church?

## II. Urim and Thummim (Review Exodus 28:15–30 with your class.)

In Exodus, the word we translate as *breastplate* in actuality means “pouch” or “container.” This may be because its primary purpose was to contain the Urim and Thummim. We don’t know what form the Urim and Thummim took precisely, but we do know that they were oracular devices, meant to answer questions important to the affairs of the people of Israel.

The terms *Urim* and *Thummim* are traditionally translated to mean “lights” and “perfections.” Interestingly, the roots of the words seem to pertain to the concepts of guilt and innocence. Other possible meanings are, respectively, “cursed” or “faultless,” in respect to one’s standing before God. To the extent to which the words refer to light, it seems to be light with an investigative or searching quality—the light that expels and dispels darkness and evil, as referred to in John 3:19. Their function is to examine or search people or situations and determine their true nature. Many ancient peoples had their oracles, oracular devices, and means of divination. Almost without exception, they were intended to answer questions about expediency or the probability of success in a given course of action. The Urim and Thummim differed in that the direction given by them had a moral dimension as well.

The one recorded instance of use of the Urim and Thummim in the Bible takes place in 1 Samuel 14:41, where they are used to determine guilt or innocence. Saul decreed a fast (*vs. 24*) in which he called the anger of God down on anyone who ate before he defeated the Philistines in battle. His son Jonathan, in a moment of weakness, tasted honey. Saul’s rash oath caused God not to answer him when he requested further advice. So the Urim and the Thummim revealed Jonathan’s guilt, but Jonathan was somehow redeemed from the death sentence (*vs. 45*).

We can determine from all of this that one of the primary functions of the Urim and the Thummim literally was to bring guilt or innocence to light. One can see how this is relevant to the function of Jesus as our High Priest and eschatological Judge of the world. The faculty of judgment or discernment is also expected of Christians as members of this royal priesthood, as stated in 1 Corinthians 6:2, 3, where we are told that “the saints”—that is to say, those belonging to the church—will judge the world, and, ultimately, angels.

**Consider This:** The Urim and Thummim were recorded as rarely being used in the Old Testament world, and it’s easy to see how such a powerful item could have been misused or abused. But how can we seek God’s

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## Jesus, Our High Priest

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (*Heb. 4:14, 15, NIV*). What hope and promise do you find in these two verses that you can apply to your own life and in your own struggle with temptation?

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Because Christ resides today as our Priest in the sanctuary in heaven, He, in a sense, wears the breastplate on His heart, as well. And because He “ever liveth to make intercession” (*Heb. 7:25*) for us, we should find comfort in the knowledge that our High Priest is touched with the feelings of our problems, pains, and temptations. Like Aaron, Jesus had been a human being who knew the trials, tribulations, and temptations of all humanity; unlike Aaron, however, Jesus was “without sin,” a crucial distinction, for out of His sinlessness we can claim two wonderful promises: (1) the robe of His righteousness can be ours by faith, and, thus, we know that we stand perfect before God; and (2) we can have the power to overcome temptation just as Jesus did.

**Read** Hebrews 8:10–13. What promises are there for us, and how should these promises be made manifest in our lives?

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Here we can see both aspects of what it means to have salvation in Christ, to be covered in His righteousness. How wonderful is the promise that the Lord will be “merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (*vs. 12*). He is talking about those who, through faith, have surrendered to Jesus and have claimed His New-Covenant promises, those who have His law written in their hearts and thus obey it, not to achieve salvation but because they already have it. Clothed in the covering of His righteousness, they now live out that righteousness in their own lives. That’s the heart and soul of the New Covenant.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

guidance and make His wisdom and discernment our own as we attempt to live Christian lives in the world?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Use the following questions and exercises to help your students to understand what it means to be part of God’s royal priesthood in the world today.

**Thought Question:**

The priest’s major function was to be the representative of the human world before God—an intermediary. How did the ministry of the Aaronic priesthood mirror that of Christ? How was it different? Read Hebrews 7.

**Application Question:**

In the biblical descriptions of the priestly garments, much is made of the breastplate and the fact that it bore the representations—in the forms of gems—of the people of Israel, God’s people at the time. Thus, the priest held the people he ministered to, and for, literally on his heart. What does this say about the attitude we should have as we minister to people, whether as professional pastors, church officers, or concerned friends?

► **STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** God’s grace is a constant. The ways in which it is visibly manifested differ, at least superficially, from one time to another. In the Old Testament era, God dispensed grace and forgiveness of sin through the Aaronic priesthood. Inevitably, the accoutrements of this system may look alien to the contemporary observer. The following activities should help the class members to relate the rituals and regalia of the temple priesthood to the plan of salvation as seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Construct a diorama, or draw a diagram, of the heavenly sanctuary (some help can be found at <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/books/27/27-23.htm>). Annotate each item with an explanation of its meaning and how it relates to the larger salvation story.

Or:

Dress in authentic reproductions of priestly robes. You will have to have the garments available or make them yourself. *These Are the Garments* by C. W. Slemming would be a big help, available at <http://www.amazon.com/These-Are-Garments-Priestly-Ancient/dp/0875088619>. Don’t forget to explain the significance of each item of clothing.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Tabernacle and Its Services,” pp. 347, 348, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Lord’s Vineyard,” p. 288, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge,” p. 293, in *Prophets and Kings*; “The Sanctuary,” pp. 250–253, in *Early Writings*; “What Is the Sanctuary?” p. 416, “God’s People Delivered,” p. 646, in *The Great Controversy*.

“Christ is the minister of the true tabernacle, the high priest of all who believe in Him as a personal Saviour, and His office no other can take. He is the high priest of the church.”—Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, p. 74.

“We should daily exercise faith; and that faith should daily increase as it is exercised, as we realize that He has not only redeemed us, but has loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests unto God and the Father.”—Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 287.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read Revelation 1:5, 6, where Jesus tells us about His job description and then gives us what we might call an “eagerly anticipated promise.” Discuss what is meant in verse 6 where He says that He has made us to be “kings and priests” to serve Him forever.
- 2 Go over some of the other garments worn by the priests as revealed in Exodus 28. What spiritual lessons and truths can be found there, as well?
- 3 We have been warned about the danger of pretending to don the garments of righteousness while not really living a righteous life. Talk about ways to evaluate our own motives and actions. How can we know if we really are wearing His robe of righteousness or if we are just fooling ourselves? What are ways to know if we are covered, or if we are really walking around in the shame of our nakedness?
- 4 Discuss the idea from Sunday’s lesson about the grace and forgiveness extended to Aaron. This man, who had been given a high responsibility, failed to live up to that responsibility. As a result, tragedy ensued. And yet, Aaron eventually was given an even greater responsibility. Is there anything we can take away from this story for ourselves, as a church, when someone given great responsibility also fails to live up to the responsibility? Discuss.