

Cleansing Power

Exodus 29-31

Let me begin with a brief reminder of the great encouragement we studied last week, the encouragement of the ministry of the Old Testament priest in picturing for us and thereby explaining to us the work of our great high priest, the Lord Jesus. Remember the garments worn by that priest, especially those two stones attached to the shoulder of the ephod, or vest. All the names of the tribes of Israel were ingrained upon those stones, such that when the priest went into the most holy place in the presence of God, he represented all of God's people. By name. And so we studied,

Ex. 28:11 "With the work of an engraver in stone, like the engravings of a signet, you shall engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel. You shall set them in settings of gold. And you shall put the two stones on the shoulders of the ephod as memorial stones for the sons of Israel. So Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders as a memorial."

And then there was the nine inch square breastplate with four rows of stones attached, three precious stones in each row.

Ex. 28:21 "And the stones shall have the names of the sons of Israel, twelve according to their names, like the engravings of a signet, each one with its own name; they shall be according to the twelve tribes...29 So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel on the breastplate of judgment over his heart, when he goes into the holy place, as a memorial before the LORD continually. 30 "And you shall put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be over Aaron's heart when he goes in before the LORD. So Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart before the LORD continually."

Exodus 28:36 "You shall also make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet: HOLINESS TO THE LORD. 37 "And you shall put it on a blue cord, that it may be on the turban; it shall be on the front of the turban. 38"So it shall be on Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things which the children of Israel hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall always be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD."

So the priest of the Old Testament represented the people of God in the presence of God. And we have a greater and more perfect priest, whose name is Jesus. The comparison and contrast between the priests of the sons of Aaron and the priesthood of Jesus is made clear in,

Heb. 7:23 "Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. 24 But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. 25 Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. 26 For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever."

Therefore, with such a high priest, we can enter God's presence as his people today. But more deeply, more significantly, what we have for our own great encouragement by God's own covenant promise is his presence among us! That's really the focus of the covenant promise, that God, the creator of

heaven and earth, would dwell among us as his people. Even after the fall of mankind into sin and his expulsion from God's presence in the Garden of Eden.

I. GOD'S PRESENCE AMONG HIS PEOPLE.

That is what ought to be of most importance in your relationship with, that God would so restore the fellowship and communion between himself and his people that he would live with us. In our day, we are so used to seeing things from our perspective. What we do. What we feel. What we want and need. What we enjoy. But the promise of God, ultimately, is that he will live with us. And that is what it is all about.

That is what heaven is all about. That is our great and eternal hope, a hope focused upon this greatest of all blessings. God himself will dwell with his people.

Rev. 21:1 "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. 4 "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

It is that promise that we have for us throughout the history of God's people in the Old Testament, the promise pictured in the life and ministry of the priests. The purpose of the priests' intercession for the people was just this,

v.42-46

Let's look at those verses a little more closely, with this great emphasis, that,

A. God's presence is the glory of our worship.

God's presence is what sets apart our corporate worship service. God's presence is what makes all of this so special. Certainly there are responses in our own experiences to God's presence, enjoyable and delightful experiences. But the distinguishing characteristic of worship is the glory of God's presence.

v.42

"I will meet with you." We've seen that before in Exodus.

Ex. 25:21 "You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. 22 "And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel."

Also,

Lev. 26:11 "I will set My tabernacle among you, and My soul shall not abhor you. 12 I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people."

You have to see your own worship in that capacity, in the context of that promise, "I will meet with you." Such glorious grace. That is what makes our sanctuary holy, God's holy presence. Not bricks and wood, not pews and windows. But God's own glory.

v.43-44

There is such a marvelous illustration of this in the actual history of God's people, when the permanent temple was finally

built and finished by King Solomon. When the ark, representing the presence of God, was to enter the temple.

1 Kings 8:6 “Then the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, into the inner sanctuary of the temple, to the Most Holy Place, under the wings of the cherubim. 7 For the cherubim spread their two wings over the place of the ark, and the cherubim overshadowed the ark and its poles. 8 The poles extended so that the ends of the poles could be seen from the holy place, in front of the inner sanctuary; but they could not be seen from outside. And they are there to this day. 9 Nothing was in the ark except the two tablets of stone which Moses put there at Horeb, when the LORD made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. 10 And it came to pass, when the priests came out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD, 11 so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. 12 Then Solomon spoke: “The LORD said He would dwell in the dark cloud. 13 I have surely built You an exalted house, And a place for You to dwell in forever.”

God is there. God is dwelling with his people. The glory of God’s presence, or I should say, the presence of God’s glory, was the dominant feature of that event. It is the dominant feature of our worship. So even today, everything we do, everything we think, everything we focus upon in worship ought to promote that awareness of the glory of God. “The tabernacle shall be sanctified by My glory.”

And that promise is the very foundation upon which our understanding and experience of worship is actually built. We worship God because of his promise. And the promise of his presence is no different from the promise of our redemption. That’s what redemption is all about. That’s what salvation is all

about. Not merely a judicial decree of the forgiveness of sins. But a judicial decree of forgiveness of sins that reestablishes fellowship between God and his fallen creatures. It is the covenant promise so often repeated in Scripture, repeated in our text this morning, “I will be their God and they will be my people.”

v.45-46

We worship God because he redeemed us. And the essence of that worship, the foundation of that worship, is this promise.

B. The promise of God’s presence is the foundation of our worship.

So what is it that you look for in a worship service today? What measure do you use to evaluate a worship service today? Usually, in this modern age, we employ some criteria of personal enjoyment or comfort. Usually, we look for excitement, or movement, or entertaining stimulation. And all those things miss the mark.

Here is the standard. The meeting of God and his people is made special, sanctified, by the presence of the glory of God. And that ought to be the consuming focus of our hearts and minds. That must be the intentional awareness of our souls. We are come to a meeting with God, where he has promised to manifest the redemption he has given us by meeting with us.

So here he is today. Among us, as we worship him in spirit and in truth. Here he is as the word is preached, and as we sing and pray. Here he is meeting with us, as his redeemed people. Here he is, in this place, in this building, in this sanctuary. This place is holy ground, for God himself is here. And how do I know that? By some emotionally charged exercise of human devotion? No. By God’s own promise.

v.45-46

That is the lesson, that is the significance of studying Old Testament worship. The promise is the same. But let me move on to a very significant question. A question so well answered by this study of Old Testament worship in the book of Exodus. The question is this, How can a holy God meet with unholy people? How can a perfectly righteous God enter into the presence of wicked and rebellious sinners such as you and me? How can a holy God have fellowship with sinful creatures?

There is such a clear and simple answer. The creature must be cleansed!

II. OUR NEED OF CLEANSING IN GOD'S PRESENCE.

But don't miss the question. Don't skip over this dilemma. Don't allow the doctrines of grace to overshadow this most practical predicament. It is plight so well expressed by the prophet Isaiah when he entered God's presence,

Is. 6:1 "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. 2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" 4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts."

People of God, that's real. That is a real experience, one you ought to consider for yourself, for if there is one thing you ought to learn from the book of Exodus is that,

A. Cleansing from sin is required for us to enter God's presence.

Isaiah 6, of course, is such a good illustration of this, because we are not left in that chapter with Isaiah's woeful declaration of uncleanness. Instead, we see God's response,

Is. 6:6 "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged."

That is the transaction that is part of our worship service, with the reading of the law, the confession of sin, and the reading of the promise of forgiveness of sins. That is why we have a confession of sin. To enter into God's glorious presence, we need to be washed.

So how do we learn that from Exodus? What was the very first piece of furniture encountered by the priest upon offering his sacrifice at the altar of burnt offering? What did he come to, in the outer court of tabernacle prior to even entering the tabernacle itself?

30:18-21

What was the bronze laver? It was a sink. A place for the priest to wash his hands. And feet. Because he was dirty.

Beloved, before you or I can ever dare to enter God's presence, we must be washed. The stain of sin must be washed away. The offense of sin must be cleansed. Yet animals won't accomplish that cleansing, nor even the actual water of the bronze laver.

Heb. 10:1 "For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these

same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. 2 For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4 For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.”

And so we read further about our New Covenant worship, Heb. 10:19 “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Let me emphasize just how high the stakes here really are. Consider what would happen to the priest if he failed to wash himself, or failed to do anything which was prescribed for him in his approach to God’s presence.

30:20-21

“Lest they die...” Failure to wash yourself meant immediate death. So great is the perfection of the glory of God’s holiness. No man can see God and live. No man can enter God’s presence and live. No man can survive that presence of God without this cleansing.

B. Cleansing from sin is necessary for us to avoid the judgment of death.

Absolutely necessary. And that is what this tabernacle system was all about. That is what the New Testament theology of salvation is all about. Cleansing from sin.

Either you will be washed clean of your sins, or you will die in your sins. That’s it. No other ground. And so our salvation is itself defined and described in terms of this washing. For example,

Titus 3:4 “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

So justification is connected with washing, the washing of regeneration. Those who are washed are justified. Those who are justified are washed. And as we will study tonight, that is precisely how the New Testament addresses Christians,

1 Cor. 6:9 “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”

All of that is pictured for us with this bronze laver at which the OT priests would wash their hands and feet. And so I ask you this morning, even as you sit in worship, have you been washed. If you have not been, if you are dirty, still stained by the guilt of your sin, then you will die! You will be condemned by a holy and righteous God to an eternal punishment of hell.

And yet, since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” there is none of us who can claim we don’t need to be

cleansed. Thus, rather than going to the sink and wash your hands, go to Jesus in order to wash your heart. And pray to him, as David prayed when he sinned,

Ps. 51:1 “Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me. 4 Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight-- That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge. 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. 6 Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice. 9 Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

There is only one way to be cleansed of sin, it is to plead for mercy with the godly sorrow of repentance. And with the hope of this great promise,

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

One more thing for us to learn from this tabernacle system of worship, one more thing to learn about the presence of God in worship, and that is the outward sign God establishes.

III. THE SIGN OF GOD’S PRESENCE AMONG HIS PEOPLE.

And what was that sign? What is that sign? What is the sign between God and his people, “that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.” Look with me at,

Ex. 31:13

Surprising, isn’t it? Not some ceremonial regulation. Not some sacrifice to be offered. But something that actually goes back to the original creation of man in the Garden of Eden. The sign of the day of worship, the sabbath day. The sign which is the day in which God’s presence was manifested among his people.

The day itself is a sign! Specifically, a day set aside as holy to the Lord signifying a people who were set aside as holy to the Lord! So the sabbath day was,

A. A sign that the Lord sanctifies his people.

v.13

Note that language, “that you may know...” So it is that an assurance of salvation, a certainty of God’s saving, redemptive work in the life of his people is tied up with a very practical and external observation of a holy day set aside for worship.

It is not a day set aside as an obligation of mere duty in obedience to law in order to earn or merit some form of reward. Rather, it is a sign of God’s grace, a declaration of that grace. It is a proclamation of redemption, an exposition of salvation. The sabbath day is the redemption we have in Christ lived out in our daily lives. Keeping the sabbath day holy is but the natural outward expression of the gracious reality that we know by faith, that in Christ, God has set us apart to be holy.

And with that sign of our redemption in Christ, that sign of God’s gracious covenant, the sabbath day is also,

B. A sign of rest and refreshment.

Because, after all, that’s what redemption is. That’s what

salvation is. Rest and refreshment. In Christ. Remember Christ's own words,

Mat. 11:28 "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

That's what the sign of the sabbath is all about. "You will find rest for your souls." Rest from the cursed load of sin. Rest from the cursed afflictions of life. Rest from the curse of death itself. Rest from the condemnation of hell.

And beloved, we get to enjoy that rest every week! What a great delight it is to be. And what a delightful description of salvation, rest and refreshment.

I don't know about you, but I need that rest and refreshment. I have a lot of responsibilities in life, a lot of necessary activity. A lot of duties and activities. A lot of burdens I bear, not only for myself but for so many of you. And I get tired out. And of all the verses in the Bible about the sabbath day, Exodus 31:17 might be my favorite, because here I learn that God himself rested and God himself was refreshed.

Now, certainly, he was never tired out like I am. But still, he took a breath from his labors, he ceased from his work at creations, and after the work of those six days was completed, he rested on the seventh day.

31:16-18

And so here we are, in worship. In the presence of God. Here we are, cleansed by the blood of Jesus so that we won't die in the presence of God. Here we are, experiencing in the day

itself, that God dwells with us as his people. So this is not an ordinary place. It is a holy place, a sanctuary. And beloved, this is not an ordinary day. This is a holy day. This day is special. This is the day of spiritual refreshment as we delight our souls in the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ.

So rest, people of God. Be refreshed by ceasing the normal activities of your lives, the work and recreations that rightfully occupy the other six days of the week. And on this day, follow the example of God himself, and in resting, refresh your soul in the greatness of the gospel promises as you delight yourself to worship in the very presence of the glory of God.

This is his promise to you, who by faith, trust in Jesus Christ, Ex. 29:45 "I will dwell among [you] and will be [your] God. 46 And [you] shall know that I am the Lord [your] God, who brought [you] up out of the land of [slavery], that I may dwell among [you]. I am the Lord [your] God."