

Twelve Precious Stones (Exodus 28)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

I. Review from the Three Previous Lesson on the Tabernacle

- a. We have been studying the tabernacle for the past few lessons.
- b. **Hebrews 8-10** explains the significance of the tabernacle and its ministry. The tabernacle is a type or model of things in the heavenly realm. Its details are all very purposeful, reflecting things regarding heaven, the church, and the saving sacrifice of Jesus.
- c. We learned from **Hebrews**, as discussed in previous lessons:
 - i. The High Priest foreshadowed Christ, our High Priest.
 - ii. The Most Holy Place, which had the ark of the covenant in it (covered by the “mercy seat”), foreshadowed heaven.
 - iii. The priests who ministered in the Holy Place represent Christians. In **Hebrews, 1 Peter** and some of the writings of Paul, in various ways, we Christians are referred to as *members of a priesthood*, who are offering spiritual sacrifices.
 1. Therefore the Holy Place, which had the three articles in it (lampstand, table of showbread and golden altar of incense), represents the church and aspects of our ministry.

II. Vestments of the High Priest and the Other Priests

- a. **Question:** Why should this matter to us?
 - i. **(Spoiler Alert:** I believe you will discover that there are some “*gems*” hidden in this story!)
 - ii. **Answer:** The high priest foreshadowed Christ, as stated several places in **Hebrews 8-10**. Therefore, we should expect that specific instructions regarding what he must wear could have significance that will be revealed later *in the life and ministry of Jesus*.
- b. Read **Exodus 28:1-14**.
 - i. What we learn here.

1. The first high priest will be *Aaron*, the brother of Moses.
2. The other priests (and priests to follow in the future) all will be *descendants of Aaron*. This will become clear in passages that follow in **Exodus** and **Leviticus**, and it is the main issue behind the story in the account of Korah's rebellion (**Numbers 16-17**), which we discussed in the previous lesson.
3. Aaron has *four sons*, all of whom are to become priests along with him.
 - a. Nadab and Abihu, the two oldest, will be struck dead in the sanctuary by the Lord for an inappropriate offering of incense, in violation of the Lord's instructions. This happens early in their ministry and is described in **Leviticus 10**.
 - b. After Nadab and Abihu die, Eleazar and Ithamar (the two remaining sons) resume the duties of priests before the Lord.
4. Aaron, the high priest, will have *very special garments* made by men whom the Lord has filled with "the spirit of wisdom and perception".
 - a. These artisans are in some way specially inspired, perhaps with some aspects of the Holy Spirit. (I think of **Isaiah 11:1-3** passage that gives the seven-fold characteristics of the Holy Spirit, which includes "the spirit of wisdom".)
5. The garments of the high priest include:
 - a. Breastplate
 - b. Ephod
 - i. Mostly linen cloth
 - ii. Two emeralds, one on each shoulder, each engraved with the names of six sons of Israel
 - c. Full-length robe
 - i. This is worn under the ephod
 - d. Tunic with a fringe
 - e. Turban (covering the top of the head)
 - f. Sash

c. Read **Exodus 28:26-38**.

i. More details regarding the garments, including:

1. Full-length blue robe to be worn under the ephod.
 - a. With sheepskin collar; hem integral with the garment (seamless?).
2. Knobs below the garment, with golden bells hanging from around the hem. People can hear the bells jingling when Aaron is walking around.
3. Golden plate hung on the front of the turban, on the forehead of the High Priest, with the inscription, '*Holiness to the Lord*'.
 - a. This points to Jesus, the true High Priest who actually was Holy (not just wearing a plate that said so).

d. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 45:6-15**.

- i. This passage describes the incredible beauty of the garments worn by Aaron, the first high priest.
- ii. "There was never so much beauty before his time. No outsider was ever clothed in these garments." (**Wisdom of Solomon 45:13**)

III. The Breastplate

- a. Whenever you see a depiction of the priests serving in the tabernacle or temple, it is easy to identify the High Priest. The most obvious sign is that *he is the only one wearing the breastplate* with the twelve gemstones on his chest.
 - i. This is a distinctive sign of the High Priest.
- b. Read **Exodus 28:15-25**.
- c. What we learn from the text here.
 - i. The breastplate is also referred to as "the oracle of judgment".
 - ii. The breastplate is mostly of woven fabric, similar in style to the ephod: gold, purple and scarlet fabric, with fine linen.
 - iii. There are four rows of three stones each are on the front panel (for a total of 12 gemstones). Each stone is different from the others, and each has engraved into it the name of one of the sons of Israel.
 - iv. There is a gold chain with this also.

- v. The breastplate is somehow significant in receiving judgments from God.
- d. **Question:** Why must there be *twelve* stones on the breastplate of the high priest? What is the Lord specific regarding *that number* of stones?
 - i. **Answer (On One Level):** The twelve stones represent the twelve tribes, the twelve of Israel (Jacob).
- e. **Follow-Up Question:** If Aaron, the high priest, represents Christ, then what might the twelve stones on his breastplate represent?
 - i. Tertullian, an early Christian writer from Carthage, in North Africa, touched on this in his dispute with Marcion, writing c. 207 AD:
 1. “But why was it that He chose twelve apostles, and not some other number? In truth, I might from this very point conclude of my Christ, that He was foretold not only by the words of prophets, but by the indications of facts.
 2. “For of this number I find figurative hints up and down the Creator’s dispensation in the twelve springs of Elim (**Exodus 15:27**); in the twelve gems of Aaron’s priestly vestment (**Exodus 28**); and in the twelve stones appointed by Joshua to be taken out of the Jordan, and set up for the ark of the covenant (**Joshua 4**). Now, the same number of apostles was thus portended, as if they were to be fountains and rivers which should water the Gentile world, which was formerly dry and destitute of knowledge (as He says by Isaiah: ‘I will put streams in the unwatered ground’ [*presumably referring to Isaiah 44:3*]); as if they were to be gems to shed lustre upon the church’s sacred robe, which Christ, the High Priest of the Father, puts on; as if, also, they were to be stones massive in their faith, which the true Joshua [= *Jesus*, in the LXX Greek] took out of the layer of the Jordan, and placed in the sanctuary of His covenant.”
 - a. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 4, chapter 13; found in ANF vol. 3, pp. 364–365)
 3. Later in the same discussion, related to this, Tertullian notes that Simon’s name was changed to Peter (= *a rock or stone*) for a reason. The Christ is foreshadowed throughout the Old Testament as a rock, as attested to by many prophecies; however, *His twelve apostles were to be stones as well*; just as He was.
 - ii. Read **Joshua 3:7-4:24**.

1. The Lord will let the people know He is with Joshua (in Hebrew his name is *Joshua*, but in Greek it is *Jesus*) just like he was with Moses.
2. The Jordan River stops flowing and becomes dry when the priests carrying the ark enter it. This is reminiscent of the Red Sea crossing by Moses in **Exodus 14**.
3. Very specific instructions are given for 12 men, one from each tribe, to take one stone per person from the Jordan River. Recall that this is the same river (the Jordan River) where Jesus would be baptized, and where His apostles and John the Baptist would baptize others (**John 3:22-23**).
4. Jesus (Joshua) sets up the 12 stones taken from the Jordan River as a monument in Gilgal. When their children in the future ask *the reason* for this monument, their answer is to be:
 - a. "...tell your children that Israel crossed the Jordan on dry land; that the Lord our God dried up the water of the Jordan from before them until they all crossed over, as the Lord our God did to the Red Sea, which the Lord our God dried up before us until we crossed over..." (**Joshua 4:22-23**, LXX, OSB)
 - i. This is a reminder to Israel that the same God who dried up the Red Sea is still with them.
 - b. "...that *all the nations of the land* [i.e., the Gentiles] might know that the power of the Lord is mighty, and that you might worship the Lord your God in every age." (**Joshua 4:24**, LXX, OSB)
 - i. This is a sign to *the Gentiles, the other nations*, as well: of the power of God.
 - ii. This sign is to encourage God's people to worship him in the future, *in every age*.
- iii. Recall that Jesus prayed all night before choosing the twelve who would be His apostles. Also, recall in **Acts 1:15-26** where the 11 remaining apostles realize from prophecy that they must replace Judas, who had killed himself, to get the number back up to twelve.
- iv. As a child, I was raised in the Roman Catholic church, where the 12 apostles were always treated with great respect. However, many Christians today, especially among the Protestants, can tend to have a dim view of the 12 apostles.

1. They often view the twelve apostles in general as flawed, disappointing, *failures* who *did not get the job done*.
 2. In contrast, they see the apostle *Paul* as the one who finally got things right and view him as by far the greatest among the apostles.
 - a. This obviously has been heavily influenced by Martin Luther's view of Paul and his writings.
 3. Also, we have many letters from Paul, and his focus was generally westward toward Europe. In contrast, most of the 12 apostles left no writings that we have.
 - a. For those of European descent or those impacted by missionary efforts originating from Europe, there is often a bias in favor of Paul as opposed to the twelve.
- v. Recall Jesus' view of the 12 apostles:
1. "So Jesus said to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'" (**Matthew 19:28**, NKJV)
 - a. Jesus held up the twelve and the importance of their mission. In the future, He said, they would be seated on twelve thrones, exalted, judging the twelve tribes.
- vi. From the **Book of Revelation**, describing the Bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem, as a glorious city:
1. "Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." (**Revelation 21:14**, NKJV)
 2. "The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst." (**Revelation 21:19-20**, NKJV)
 - a. The foundations of the walls of the great city (the church) are the twelve apostles.
 - b. Each of the twelve foundations is described as comprised of a different gemstone. That reminds me of

the twelve gemstones on the breastplate of the high priest!

3. We learn here that the twelve apostles make up the foundation of the church.
 - a. Consider that they were called to take the gospel to all the nations: to proclaim to the nations that their God's were false, to call them to repent, and to turn to the One living God.
 - b. And this is what they did! (And it got most of them killed.)
 - c. Jesus knew these men would be worthy of great honor.
- vii. The early Christian writers also viewed the twelve apostles with great respect and honor. They certainly did *not* see the twelve as failures, second rate, or inferior to Paul.
 1. From *The Apology of Aristides*, a Christian convert who had been a philosopher in Athens, writing c. 125 AD:
 - a. "The Christians, then, trace the beginning of their religion from Jesus the Messiah; and he is named the Son of God Most High. And it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin assumed and clothed himself with flesh; and the Son of God lived in a daughter of man. This is taught in the gospel, as it is called, which a short time ago was preached among them; and you also if you will read therein, may perceive the power which belongs to it.
 - b. "This Jesus, then, was born of the race of the Hebrews; and he had twelve disciples in order that the purpose of his incarnation might in time be accomplished. But he himself was pierced by the Jews, and he died and was buried; and they say that after three days he rose and ascended to heaven.
 - c. "*Thereupon these twelve disciples went forth throughout the known parts of the world, and kept showing his greatness with all modesty and uprightness.* And hence also those of the present day who believe that preaching are called Christians, and they are become famous."
 - i. (Source: Aristides of Athens, *The Apology of Aristides*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 9, p. 265)

- ii. Note that this very early Christian writer, who is writing just a few decades after the death of the last apostle (John), says that the twelve apostles *did exactly what Jesus told them to do* in the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18-20**). They took the message throughout the known world.
- 2. Justin Martyr, a convert to the Christian faith originally from Samaria, writing c. 160 AD and here speaking to the Romans:
 - a. “And when the Spirit of prophecy speaks as predicting things that are to come to pass, He speaks in this way: ‘For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.’ (**Isaiah 2:3-4**)
 - b. “And that it did so come to pass, we can convince you. *For from Jerusalem there went out into the world, men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking: but by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the word of God; and we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.*”
 - i. (Source: Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 39; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 175–176)
 - ii. Here again, we see an early Christian witness testifying that the twelve apostles did what Jesus told them to do, namely proclaiming the word of God *to every race of men*.
- 3. Origen, a Christian teacher from Alexandria, Egypt, writing c. 245 AD:
 - a. “the Apostles on this *account left Israel and did that which had been enjoined on them by the Savior, ‘Make disciples of all the nations,’ (Matthew 28:19)* and, ‘You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judæa

and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.’
(Acts 1:8) For they did that which had been
 commanded them in Judea and Jerusalem; but, since a
 prophet has no honor in his own country, when the
 Jews did not receive the Word, they went away to the
 Gentiles.”

- b. (Source: Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, book 10, chapter 18; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 9, p. 426)
4. Lactantius, a prominent Roman teacher who converted to the Christian faith (who was summoned to Gaul to tutor the son of Emperor Constantine), writing c. 304-313 AD:
 - a. “In the latter days of the Emperor Tiberius, in the consulship of Ruberius Geminus and Fufius Geminus, and on the tenth of the kalends of April, as I find it written, Jesus Christ was crucified by the Jews. After He had risen again on the third day, He gathered together His apostles, whom fear, at the time of His being laid hold on, had put to flight; and while He sojourned with them forty days, He opened their hearts, interpreted to them the Scripture, which hitherto had been wrapped up in obscurity, ordained and fitted them for the preaching of His word and doctrine, and regulated all things concerning the institutions of the New Testament; and this having been accomplished, a cloud and whirlwind enveloped Him, and caught Him up from the sight of men unto heaven.
 - b. “His apostles were at that time eleven in number, to whom were added Matthias, in the room of the traitor Judas, and afterwards Paul. *Then were they dispersed throughout all the earth to preach the Gospel, as the Lord their Master had commanded them; and during twenty-five years, and until the beginning of the reign of the Emperor Nero, they occupied themselves in laying the foundations of the church in every province and city.*”
 - c. (Source: Lactantius, *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*, chapter 2; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, p. 301)
 5. Note that we see in the early church, Christian writers from various parts of the world (Athens, Greece; Samaria; Rome and Alexandria, Egypt) all testifying that the twelve apostles did exactly what Jesus commissioned them to do.

- a. The early Christians saw the twelve apostles as faithful heroes.
- f. The significance for us.
 - i. If Tertullian's analysis is correct, the twelve precious stones on the breastplate of the High Priest (representing Jesus) point to the twelve apostles.
 - ii. This also is foreshadowed in the detailed instructions provided by the OT Jesus (Joshua) on crossing the Jordan River.
 - 1. These stones were taken from under the water, from the Jordan River, to be a monument.
 - 2. The purpose of this pile of rocks: to spread the knowledge of God to the other nations, and to provide testimony in the future.
 - iii. The twelve apostles were an important part of God's plan. They were "uneducated and untrained men" (**Acts 4:13**) who gave up everything to take the kingdom message out to the world, building the foundation for the church.
 - iv. They *did not* fail to do the job Jesus gave them in the Great Commission. The early Christians saw them as faithful, humble men who laid down their lives to do what Jesus told them to do. They accomplished the mission they were given.
 - 1. The only reason there is a Christian church today, with millions of adherents all over the world, is because of the twelve apostles. If they simply (out of fear or laziness) declined to spread the message, *there would be no church*.
 - 2. They risked their lives to take the message and lay the foundation upon which we are still building.
 - 3. They were faithful to Jesus and to the mission He entrusted to them.
 - v. Jesus is the Rock, the Precious Stone. The Christ is portrayed this way throughout the Scriptures. Peter points to three examples from prophecy related to that, in **1 Peter 2**.
 - 1. Read **1 Peter 2:1-10**.
 - a. There Peter points to three "stone" prophecies about Christ in the Jewish Scriptures (**Isaiah 28:16**, **Psalms 118:22** and **Isaiah 8:14**).

2. Like Jesus, Peter and the other apostles, God is calling us to be stones: living stones, precious stones, rejected by men but chosen by God.

IV. Closing Challenges

- a. Let us respect what the twelve apostles did, and follow the example of Jesus as well as their faithful example: carrying out the work Jesus has given us to do in our own age.
- b. Let us never build on any foundation other than the one originally laid by the twelve apostles.
 - i. They are the foundation intended from the beginning, the twelve gems in the breastplate of the high priest, upon which the twelve-fold foundation upon which the walls of the church stand.