

Text: Exod. 29:1-9

Title: "Bringing near God's priesthood"

Time: 9/10/2023 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: In 1912 the infamous ship *The Titanic* sunk into the icy waters of the Atlantic, bringing with it 1500 people to meet their Maker. As the ship slowly sank and the outcome became inevitable, the ship's band bravely took up their instruments to comfort the panicked passengers by playing a hymn that is in our hymnbook, "Nearer My God to Thee."

The hymn was written by Sarah Adams, who attended at the time she wrote the hymn a Unitarian Church in London. One biographical essay I read about her noted some evidence that before her death at the young age of 43, Mrs. Adams turned from Unitarian unbelief to Christ, after which she associated with a Baptist congregation in London [Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (1982), 170].

The hymn is based on Jacob's dream at Bethel in Genesis 28 as he fled the wrath of his brother Esau. The second verse says, "Tho like the wanderer, the sun gone down, darkness be over me, my rest a stone, yet in my dreams I'd be nearer my God, to Thee, nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee." When Sarah finally found Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to be her Savior, she found herself at once brought near to her God through Him. The longing expressed in her song finally found its satisfaction in Christ.

That we may be brought near to the God of the Bible through the work of our Savior is the message of the passage before us this morning. Three times in these verses we are told that Moses was to bring Aaron and his sons near (vv. 3, 4, 8). As I have studied this chapter of instructions for the dedication of Israel's priesthood, which are executed carefully in Leviticus 8, I believe the instructions include four activities that help us

understand what it means to be God's priest: bringing-near (vv. 1-9), sacrificing (vv. 10-28), ministering (vv. 29-42), and dwelling (vv. 43-46).

This morning we will focus on the bringing near of God's priesthood. You will notice that verse one begins, "And this is the thing thou shalt do." In Hebrew, the word *thing* and the word *word* are the same word. The Lord tells Moses literally, "And this is the word that thou shalt do." This thing, these instructions, are a word from God to us. All the things that must be done to Aaron and his sons to prepare them for the priesthood are symbols with messages to us about what it means to be God's priest. We too are His priests (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). This morning, we will note three things together about the way God's priests are brought near.

I. To be brought near is to be set apart (vv. 1-3).

Illustration: *To hallow* something means *to make something holy* or *to sanctify*, and *to sanctify* means *to set something apart for a special purpose*. We often refer to the hallowed ground of Arlington Cemetery. As you enter the Cemetery, a sign greets you with an important message: "Welcome to Arlington Cemetery, our nation's most sacred shrine. Please conduct yourself with dignity and respect at all times. Please remember these are hallowed grounds."

What does that sign mean when it says that "these are hallowed grounds"? It means that the grounds of what was once the estate of Robert E. Lee have now been set apart to honor the memory of those who served our nation in the military. It means that those grounds are not to be used for other things, like growing and harvesting hay for your horses. It means that the purpose and meaning these grounds represent must be treated with dignity and respect.

Application: That is what the Lord is doing with His priesthood in this passage. He is hallowing them, setting them apart for a special purpose, which has special meaning. And the symbols He chooses to begin bringing them near to this office indicate that no one can be brought near and hallowed for the Lord's priesthood without the work of Jesus Christ.

First we have a young bullock (v. 1). Jesus is the defenseless Calf of Calvary, by whom we may be brought near into the priesthood. A calf is a very dependent animal. Like a kitten or a puppy, a calf is completely defenseless in the wild. Using parallel metaphors of our Savior's defenselessness, Isaiah said the Messiah would grow up like a tender plant (53:2), and that He would suffer like a sheep before its shearers (v. 7).

And whereas the calf symbolizes the defenseless, willing obedience of Jesus's atoning work, the two rams remind us of one caught in the thicket on Mount Moriah, which took the place of Isaac on Abraham's altar of sacrifice (Gen. 22:13). Jesus's work of atonement is a work of substitution.

Again, Isaiah tells us of the substitutionary (vicarious) nature of this work: "Surely, he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:4-6).

Finally, the three types of unleavened bread mixed or anointed with oil in the one basket likely tell us of our Savior's sinlessness in the eyes of His Father, of the role of the Holy Spirit in His ministry as our Mediator, and of the source of sustaining life He is for those who hunger with spiritual famine.

All this to say that Jesus loved us and gave Himself for us, and that is why we must now see ourselves as set apart to His priesthood. In Gal. 2:20, Paul defined his life in these terms: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." He loved you and me. He gave Himself for you and for me. Has the import of that truth ever occurred to us? When it does, we shall know that we must live by faith in the Son of God. We must be faithful priests for Him who died for us. To be brought near is to be set apart.

II. To be brought near is to be stationed at the door of the congregation (vv. 4-7).

Illustration: One of the features of Arlington Cemetery, of course, is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Stationed at the tomb are members of the Army's 3rd Infantry Regiment. There has been a sentinel stationed at the tomb every minute of every day since 1937.

Application: As God's priesthood, Aaron and his sons are stationed at the door of the house of God – the tabernacle (v. 4). The author of Hebrews likely mediated on the meaning of these symbols from Exodus 29 as he wrote: "And having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near [to the house of God, where He is] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:21-22).

The washing that verse speaks of comes from Exod. 29:4. Once Aaron and his sons were brought near to the door of the tabernacle, their bodies were washed with what Hebrews calls "pure water." Purity is the point of this washing symbol. Their bodies were then clothed with the garments of the priesthood, with all the gospel messages those garments entailed, and then their bodies were anointed with the anointing oil, representing

the way the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to be a witness at the door of God's house.

Three verses later in Hebrews 10, the author explains that not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together is an important part of accomplishing God's command to draw near. In other words, we very literally draw near to be stationed at the door of God's house today when we assemble as a local church of Christ. To forsake the assembly time is to fail to draw near. It is to abandon the post assigned to His priests today.

But it is also clear from this passage in Hebrews that local churches are congregations where sinners who are saved by grace through faith are stationed. God has put us at the door of His house with "a true heart in full assurance of faith," not with a full assurance that comes from our works. He has freed our hearts from our evil conscience with a sprinkling, for we know that Christ's blood cleanses us from all our sin.

And we know He has washed our bodies in pure water, because the day He saved us was the day our bodies were no longer defined by the filth of our sin. Paul spoke of this amazing change to our bodies in salvation: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Our bodies stand at the door of His house, washed, clothed with the gospel message, and empowered by God's Spirit to bring others to God.

The monument of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier includes a word of commitment called, "The Sentinel's Creed," which describes the dedication of the soldiers stationed at the tomb:

“My dedication to this sacred duty is total and whole-hearted. In the responsibility bestowed on me never will I falter. And with dignity and perseverance my standard will remain perfection. Through the years of diligence and praise and the discomfort of the elements, I will walk my tour in humble reverence to the best of my ability. It is he who commands the respect I protect, his bravery that made us so proud. Surrounded by well meaning crowds by day, alone in the thoughtful peace of night, this soldier will in honored glory rest under my eternal vigilance.”

That is the dedication that our station at the door of God’s house calls for from you and me as God’s priests. We are sentinels of the empty tomb of our resurrected Lord, with Whom we meet in worship every Lord’s Day. Can we say we have been found at our post faithfully? To be brought near is to be stationed at the door of the congregation.

III. To be brought near is to have been born a son (vv. 8-9).

Illustration: One author noted that becoming a priest of Israel was a birth right, and that the same hold true today: “The way into the office of priesthood now, as of old, is by birth. None but sons of God in this age are priests unto God. No human power can confer this right; no ecclesiastical hierarchy can impart to any being privileges which come only through birth. Every [born-again] believer is entitled to minister as a priest” [Needham, *Substance and Shadow* (1896), 196].

Application: In our passage, the priesthood is comprised of Aaron and his sons. One had to be born a son of Aaron to be a priest of Israel. And the same is true for God’s priesthood today. It is made up only of those who have been born again into the family of God.

The author of Hebrews explains how this happens: “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the

suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. For it became Him, for Whom are all things, and by Whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren . . . Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:9-15).

It is not our doctors or their hospitals that can free us from the bondage of death. Jesus, God's Son, died so that you and I could be His eternal brothers and sisters. He died so that we could be born into the family of God with eternal life. He died to give us the eternal glory of God's sons and of His priests.

Do you believe He did that for you? Someday, though we will never be passengers on *The Titanic*, we will unavoidably experience what they did. Something will take us to meet our Maker. We do not know when that will be, but we do know that it is only a matter of time. Soon we will die.

But our passage's symbols teach us that we do not have to live in bondage to the fear of death. Jesus has accomplished a work through which God is bringing many sons to glory. Is that a work that He is doing for you? By the grace of God, Jesus experienced death for every man. Those who turn from unbelief to trust Jesus as Savior are born into the priesthood of God. Has that happened to you? Have you turned from unbelief to faith? If not, will you trust in Him today? To be brought near is to have been born a son.

Conclusion: If that has happened to you, did you know that you are now God's priest? Have you been a faithful priest?

We have been set apart for this work, stationed at the door of the congregation for this work, and born again with eternal sonship into the family of God for this work.

Does not the empty tomb of our Savior deserve more devotion from us than we have given it? Should not we decide, in the words of The Old Guard of Arlington, to dedicate ourselves more fully to this calling. We too should confess this morning:

“My dedication to this sacred duty [shall be] total and wholehearted. In the responsibility bestowed on me never will I falter. And with dignity and perseverance my standard will remain perfection. Through the years of diligence and praise and the discomfort of the elements, I will walk my tour in humble reverence to the best of my ability.” Aaron and his sons were far from perfect (golden calf, strange fire). Imperfect though we are, we are privileged by amazing grace to serve the One who deserves perfection. May we truly do our best. May we be found faithful for Him.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*