

Representation in Heaven

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[0 : 00] Well, I don't know how interested you are in South African foreign relations, but this month is quite an interesting one for our relations with the United States, diplomatically, because our ambassador, the South African ambassador to the United States, is being recalled back to South Africa this month, largely because she's been rather absent in the last few months where we've had that fallout with the United States over alleged ties with Russia.

If you've been following the news, you'll know what I'm talking about, that ship that was in Simonstown, and this whole American ambassador accusing us of supplying Russia with arms and then needing to patch relations with America, and then our ambassador is suddenly nowhere to be seen.

And so, next month, there will be a new yet unnamed South African ambassador in Washington in the place of the old one, and it's vital, of course, that the South African government chooses the right person to be in Washington to represent South Africa and our interests.

But, you know, why does that matter to you? Why does South African foreign relations matter?

What do you care? What do I care? Well, you see, an ambassador is a very important person.

An ambassador is a person who is in a foreign country but from South Africa who represents our interests as South African citizens in that foreign country.

[1 : 28] And USA, like them or not, they're important. It's an important country to have good relations with because they affect trade deals. They affect foreign investment, foreign aid.

They create more employment if they allow more business and more investment to go in our country. So, whether you think it or not, no matter how interested or not you are in foreign relations, it's vital that you have someone in the United States and other powerful countries in the world who is able to get an audience with the decision makers in those countries and represent your interests.

As a South African citizen there. That's why we need ambassadors in other countries. So that they're able to get an audience with the people who matter and represent your interests there.

Do you know the same is true of heaven? Far more important, actually, than you being represented in Washington is you being represented in heaven.

Far more important, actually, than you being represented in heaven. Because heaven is the ultimate control room of earth. Far more than we realize.

[2 : 51] Decisions made in the heavenly realms affect everything that happens here in our world and in our lives more than we tend to realize.

The things that are happening in heaven are things that affect our lives on earth. And so the question I want us to consider this morning is, how well are your interests being represented there?

Have you ever thought of that? Or, let me put it another way. How do you know, how do you really know that your prayers, when you pray, are even being heard in heaven?

Lots of people pray. Everybody prays sooner or later. Even if it's in their dying moments. But not all prayers are heard.

Not all prayers are considered. Unlike what many people believe, God is under no obligation to hear your prayers. Or to just hear anyone's prayers. He's not this 24-7 help desk in the sky like lots of people treat Him.

[4 : 03] We've been banished as humans from God's presence because of sin. God is under no obligation to listen to us. In fact, the Bible teaches there is no direct line to God for sinful humans.

There never has been. And there never will be. And the only way the Bible teaches to ever get a hearing in heaven, in the heavenly realms, to have your voice heard there, the only way, according to the Bible, is if you have someone there who is representing you.

An ambassador to speak on your behalf for your interests in heaven. Well, it turns out that that's what the priests in the Old Testament were all about.

But they were effectively ambassadors to represent human beings in a heavenly space, which they could access in the Old Testament through the tabernacle, which we've been seeing over the past few weeks, looking at this tabernacle that God designed to be built.

You know, these instructions we read in these chapters of Exodus, they were given to Moses on the mountain by God, these blueprints for the temple and the blueprints for what the priests were meant to wear, which is what chapter 28 is all about.

[5 : 37] And the whole point of chapter 28 is to describe the priest's clothing, which teach us about the role of the priest, which is to represent people in the heavenly space, to bring the interests of the humans to the ears of heaven.

Also, we see in this chapter that the priests had another role, which was to represent heaven to earth. And so that, in the Bible, priests always have that dual role, to represent earth to heaven and to represent heaven to earth.

Now, tonight, at our Sunday at 6, we're going to be looking more into their role of representing heaven to earth and how we fit into that.

So come along to that. And we're going to be looking more at Exodus 28. But for now, what I want to do is to concentrate on what Exodus 28 teaches us about the role of priests to represent people in heaven, to be ambassadors of people in a heavenly space, and why it's vital that you need someone in your life who can do that for you.

So let's have a look. I hope your Bibles are open in Exodus 28. There's a few verses we're going to look at. But as we read Exodus 28, it's all about the clothes and the jewelry of the priests.

[7 : 11] And central to this weird outfit they wore was something called an ephod and a breast piece.

Now, the ephod, we don't really use the word ephod today. You don't go to Edgar's and say, where is the ephod section? An ephod was kind of like, I was thinking of an illustration.

It's kind of like one of those body armor vests that the armed response guys wear. You know, bulletproof vests. I was actually thinking first of, I go paddling in the ocean, and I wear a PFD, a personal flotation device.

But then I thought, you know what? A Plumstead audience would probably relate better to body armor. So, think of it like that. The ephod is this body armor.

And then on that, they had this breast piece, which was filled with these beautiful jewels. Let's read about them. So, from verse 6, 28 verse 6. They are to make the ephod of finely spun linen, embroidered with gold and with blue, purple, and scarlet yarn.

[8 : 21] And then down to verse 9. Take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of Israel's sons, six of their names in the first stone, and the remaining six names on the second stone, in order of their birth.

Engrave the two stones with the names of Israel's sons as a gem cutter engraves a seal. Mount them surrounded with gold, filigree settings. Fasten both stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod as memorial stones.

This is important to the Israelites. Aaron will carry their names on his two shoulders before the Lord as a reminder or a remembrance or a memorial.

So, you had these, on this ephod, these two stones, onyx stones, which were to represent Israel to God.

And then, you had this breast piece, and that was filled with these beautiful precious gems. And we see from verse 21 about that. So, have a look.

[9 : 27] The twelve stones are to correspond to the names of Israel's sons. Each stone must be engraved like a seal with one of the names of the twelve tribes.

And then, verse 29, whenever he enters the sanctuary, Aaron is to carry the names of Israel's sons over his heart on the breast piece for decisions as a continual reminder before the Lord.

Okay, so, what the high priest is doing is that he's literally, when he enters into the tabernacle in the holy space, he's bearing Israel on his shoulders and over his heart.

The tribes of Israel. The people of God. And he's bringing them into God's remembrance as a memorial, as a reminder in the holy place in the tabernacle.

So, you'll remember from what we've been looking at, the tabernacle is a little bit of heaven on earth in the Old Testament. It's the place where the heavenly space and the earthly space overlap and God's presence can be accessed.

[10:38] And the priest is to go in there and to bear Israel on his shoulders and over his heart as a remembrance to the Lord. Which is pretty weird because God doesn't forget. So, why does he have to have a reminder of Israel?

It's not, when it's saying that as a reminder, it's not like Aaron goes in there and goes, remember the Israelites? And God's like, oh yeah, the Israelites, I saved them out of Egypt.

Oh yeah, how are they doing? It's not like God forgets the Israelites. But what it's saying that Aaron has to bear them as a remembrance before the Lord is that God is saying through that that he will bring them to mind he will consider them only if they have a worthy ambassador in this holy space. Someone fit to interact in the heavenly space who can represent them to God. Just as an ambassador, not anyone can go and meet the decision makers in America.

There has to be an ambassador who's fit to interact in those circles and to speak to those important people. And in the same way the priest was an ambassador for the people who could go where they couldn't go and represent them to God.

[12:00] But he had to dress the part. Just like an ambassador going to a diplomatic event. You wouldn't want, imagine they have this fancy diplomatic formal cocktail party for all the high flyers, all the political high flyers in America, and then our South Africa ambassador rocks up with like a t-shirt and shorts.

You wouldn't want that, would you? They've got to dress the part. And if an ambassador lives in a country with certain cultural customs or certain dress codes, they've got to adhere to those customs and dress codes.

They've got to dress the part if they're going to represent. And it's the same for the priests. There was a certain dress code if they were going to represent Israel to God.

And the dress code was actually the main dress code of heaven is holiness. Holiness, which is what all the gold and the parts of the priest's clothing represent.

So, for example, look at verse 36. Now it's talking about his hat, his turban. And it says, you are to make a pure gold medallion.

[13:16] That's important. Pure gold, as we've been reading, is only associated with heavenly spaces. You don't see any pure gold outside of the tabernacle in the earthly spaces. It's only in the heavenly spaces.

And there's to be this pure gold medallion, verse 36, and engrave it like the engraving of a seal, holy to the Lord. Fasten it to a cord of blue yarn so it can be placed on the turban.

The medallion is to be on the front of the turban. So basically, there's this, Aaron's walking into the holy space and he has this big label on his forehead saying, holy, you know, I'm dressed appropriately for this place.

And that, God, inferring this holiness on him, allowed him into the space that humans normally can't enter because we are not by nature holy.

Sorry to disappoint you if you think you're holy, but you're not. We are sinners. It's very clear. We just have to look at our own lives over the past week and we realize we are not holy.

[14:20] We do not belong in that space, that holy space, that pure space. And that is exactly why we need an intermediary because we can't approach God directly.

where sin is. And God hates sin. He really does. He hates it with the passion.

It is completely contrary to his pure holiness and righteousness and God does not tolerate sin in his presence and he never will.

It's who he is. It's almost like he doesn't have a choice. It's his very nature to destroy anything impure in his presence. As much as flying in the sun is going to burn you up, approaching God as a sinner is going to destroy you.

That's why we need an intermediary. But God actually also loves people and he wants us to be able to access him. And so what he does here, and this is why Exodus 28 was so important for the Israelites and is so important for us because it shows us that God allows a worthy intermediary into his presence who can represent sinful people to a holy God who normally wouldn't be able to have an audience with him.

[15 : 44] It's a grace of God that he allows this priestly system. But as we read on we realize that the priest is there not only to represent the people but to actually make them look good.

These gems that he wears, they were amazing gems. I mean just to go to a jewelry shop and buy one of those gems, a small one as a pendant is going to cost you a lot of money and it's beautiful. You know when a woman dresses up and wears those gems and those jewelry it really shines and each of those gems was a different one and it was beautiful and what the priest was doing is wearing these gems that represented the tribes of Israel the people of God and basically saying look how good they are.

Look how good they look. He was there to not only represent their needs but to make them look good. What's interesting if you read these gems each of them and you look where else in the Bible mentions them we don't have time to go to all the passages but they are rare gemstones that were associated with the Garden of Eden and so as the priest is taking these gems that are associated with Eden before the fall to represent the people of God it's as if he's showing to God his people but not as they are now rather as as they should be pre-fall without sin beautiful products of Eden not as these fallen sinners that's what the gems were there to represent these Edenic ideal people to God and that's so that's what the priest was there to do to go into the access the heavenly space because God allows him to through this brand of holiness and then to represent the people to God and to make them look good but there's a problem there's a problem in this whole system the problem is that the priest himself didn't belong there because that's not his natural habitat and you see that as we read this passage you see these hints dropped all along the way that's not where the priest is supposed to be because he's actually a human underneath all those clothes he wasn't holy in himself he was only temporarily declared holy by God to access that place and not often and that's why he could be killed if he wasn't careful so have a look at verse 35 as an example the robe it's talking about his big long robe and it says it'll be worn by Aaron whenever he ministers and its sound will be heard when he enters the sanctuary before the Lord and when he exits so that he does not die

I should have read from verse 34 which explains what's going on there's gold bells and pomegranates weird but anyway that's what it was at the bottom of his robe there are these bells that ring as he walks and the reason is so that he doesn't get killed when he walks into the holy place what on earth is going on there well it's a reminder that he can't just barge in to the holy place he has to approach carefully it's kind of like when a person is having an audience with a king or someone important and they have to be announced before they can't just you know barge in and so there was the sense that there needs to be this announcement before he comes into the holy place so that he can also prepare to enter it it's a big thing you've got to approach it with reverence a human approaching this holy space you know there could be the chapter goes on we didn't read it but it tells us they could be killed even from wearing the wrong underpants

[20 : 01] I'm not joking look with me at the end of chapter 28 it's literally what it says okay from verse 42 make them linen underpants undergarments but it's just a nice word of saying underpants to cover their naked bodies they must extend from the waist to the thighs these must be worn by Aaron and his sons whenever they enter the tent of meeting or approach the altar to minister in the sanctuary area so that they do not incur guilt and die they could die if they were wearing the wrong underpants literally this is a very dangerous place to be now the whole point by the way of that underpants thing is that the priests in the pagan cultures around them used to flaunt themselves literally and they used to have all of these like sexually depraved orgies in pagan worship and so the Hebrew priests had to cover up they weren't like the priests of the nations around them but the reminder all of this the fact that they could so easily die and they they actually did like

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu we read in Leviticus their first day on the job they got something wrong they died they were struck dead like it's serious business coming into this holy place and the reason is and these things are here to remind us that there were still sinners underneath all of the regalia all of this heavenly clothing just covered over temporarily but their sin could still so easily slip out and be exposed and kill them or at least disqualify them from their priestly role they could be expelled as ambassadors you know sometimes ambassadors are expelled from countries like the South African government once the American ambassador now expelled from their country doesn't do our foreign relations much good but that's the way it is sometimes ambassadors no longer fit to be in a country and in the same way very often in Israel's history the priests were no longer fit because of their unholiness they were no longer fit to represent

Israel to God to be in that holy space and that is the problem you see with intermediaries and most religions have some sort of intermediaries where some person you go to to be a go-between between you and God whether it's priests or popes or ancestors in African traditional religions those are all intermediaries to represent our case to God but the problem is that none of those intermediaries themselves are fit for God's space they don't belong there and so we need someone who is fit for God's space to represent us we need someone who does belong there what we need if we're ever going to have a hearing in the heavenly space what we need is a human one of us who can represent us but also who is fit for heaven who belongs there you see

Exodus 28 as we read about the priest shows us the picture of what we need like all of this part of Exodus that we're reading it shows us the picture of what we need but it is not the actual fulfillment of it the fulfillment comes later and it's what the rest of the Old Testament looks forward to a perfect priest one who can perfectly represent us in the heavenly space turn with me to Hebrews 7 or if you're too lazy you can just listen or if you don't know where Hebrews is don't worry just listen we'll have the verses on behind me as well Hebrews 7 verse 11 now if perfection came through the Levitical priesthood from the basis of it people received the law what further need was there for another priest to appear said to be according to the order of Melchizedek and not according to the order of Aaron don't worry about all that technical stuff but what it's saying is if the priests of the Old Testament could represent people perfectly to God why did the prophets talk about another one who was coming a greater priest and then it goes and it explains in verse 26 to 28 for this is the kind of priest we need holy innocent undefiled separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens he doesn't need to offer sacrifices every day as high priests do first for their own sins and then for the people he did this once for all time when he offered himself now the law appoints as high priests men who are weak but the promise of the oath which came after the law appoints a son who has been perfected forever that's talking about Jesus

Christ and the whole argument of this very important book of Hebrews in our Bible it goes into all of this tabernacle Old Testament stuff and it argues rightly so that Jesus is the one that all of the symbolism pointed to and we've been seeing that haven't we over the last few weeks we've been looking at the design of the tabernacle the materials it was made out of the furniture inside it and every time every sermon we see it points to Jesus in some way and that's what Hebrews is here to help us to decode is to see that all of this all of the symbolism and the priesthood itself pointed to Jesus and what he can do for you and me look at verse 23 of Hebrews 7 now many have become Levitical priests since they are prevented by death from remaining in office but because he remains forever he holds his priesthood permanently therefore oh this is a beautiful verse he is able to save completely those who come to

[26 : 46] God through him since he always lives to intercede for them and it's vital that you realize this about Jesus you may know Jesus as your savior and if you do that's good but I wonder do you consider him your priest the human being the flesh and blood human being who is now in heaven that by the way is the outcome of his resurrection his bodily resurrection and his bodily ascension to heaven means there is now right at this moment a human being in heaven one of us a flesh and blood human being is right now in heaven and he's there to bear on his shoulders and on his heart the humans who he represents there is no more important question to ask yourself than are you one of those humans who he represents in heaven right now because it's not anyone he doesn't represent all humans there but only those who according to verse 25 come to

God through him in other words who trust him and have been baptized into his name those who are in him the Bible constantly speaks about people who are in Christ and it's only those who have representation in heaven those who are in him only those people are able to approach God because they approach God through him and only their prayers are heard and brought to remembrance and considered by God and have an audience with God I can't actually stress enough what amazing thing it is that you and I can have an audience with God the God who is enthroned on high who is surrounded by these heavenly creatures the cherubim and thousands of angels worshipping him 24 7 and that God right now in heaven gives ear to your voice when you pray and only because you have a representative in heaven if you are in Christ that God who has all this glory around him listens to you if you come to him through Christ and Christ is there right now in the flesh as a human who belongs in heaven not only to represent you if you're a Christian but actually to make you look good there see because if you are in Christ you are endowed with his righteousness you are clothed in his heavenly beauty it covers over

because of the blood he shed on the cross and his righteousness covers over your sin and washes you away and he clothes you in his righteousness listen to Colossians 1 verse 22 listen to how Christ makes you look if you come if you are in him Colossians 1 22 but now he has reconciled you by his physical body through his death to present you holy faultless and blameless before him you know you need that you know you're a sinner and if you don't if you think you can approach God in your own righteousness by your own good works you would do well to remember that not even the holiest men in Israel could and you need to learn to judge yourself not by the standard of those around you but by God's standard and if you judge yourself by God's standard you realize the words of the confession we prayed earlier there is no health in us don't think you can just barge in to the presence of a holy God without being destroyed in your sin but if you do realize that you can't approach that God in your own efforts if you realize you are too sinful if you stop just for a moment and consider your own life and you come to realize you are too sinful for an audience with God and maybe that's why you keep your distance from him deep down inside maybe you keep your distance from

God because you know you are not worthy to approach him you know your sins this week even make you unworthy of God well if you think that you're right they do they banish you from his presence you can't approach God you can't you're a sinner you've been banished long ago but I want to tell you this morning there is a priest there is a human in heaven right now who can approach God and who is able to represent you there Jesus Christ and if you are in him by repentance and baptism and if you haven't done that if you haven't turned your life and laid it at the foot of

[33 : 05] Jesus and said you own me I am yours take me as I am forgive me I trust in your death and the cross and you baptized into his name if you haven't done that do there's no time to waste do that if you haven't yet then you are given that seal holy to the Lord because you are holy not in yourself but in Christ so that when God looks at you he sees you with the beauty and the glory not of what you are now but what he made you to be because he sees you with the glory of his own son I want to end with Hebrews 4 14 to 16 listen to these words therefore since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens

Jesus the son of God let us hold fast to our confession for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but one who has been tempted in every way as we are yet without sin therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need let's do that now let's pray oh great God Lord we approach you now through Jesus Christ you are in glory surrounded by cherubim and seraphim and thousands of angels and yet you are hearing our voice because we come to you in Jesus Lord Lord Jesus we thank you for being our ambassador in heaven for representing us for bearing us on your shoulders and on your heart

Lord help us to cling to you and to realize that it is only through you that we have a voice and a place in the heavenly realm and Lord would you help us to realize what it means for our lives every day I also pray for anyone here who is not in Christ I pray for anyone here who does not have a representative in heaven that you would help them to realize that they need Christ and to submit their lives to him in realization that their lives come from you not to hold on in stubborn independence but to submit to Christ our high priest who brings us into your glorious presence we pray this in Jesus name Amen