

September 22, 2024 (Lesson 4)

## AARON: THE FIRST PRIEST OF ISRAEL

1. **Aaron Ordained as Israel's High Priest** (Exodus 28:1-3; Leviticus 8:1-9, 35-36; 9:22-24)
2. **Aaron Enables Idolatry** (Exodus 32:1-24)
3. **God Miraculously Reaffirms Aaron's Priesthood** (Numbers 17:1-11)

**Central Truth:** God examines and uses those who dedicate their lives to Him.

**Focus:** Reflect on the priesthood of Israel and cultivate an appreciation for God-called Christian leaders.

**Evangelism Emphasis:** Proclaim the Gospel and affirm its ongoing effectiveness for holy living.

**Golden Text:** "Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of the congregation, and came out, and blessed the people: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto all the people" (Leviticus 9:23).

We are blessed to live post-Calvary. Living after the death and resurrection of Jesus means we have full admission to our heavenly Father (Eph. 3:12; Heb. 10:19-22). For much of human history, the people of God did not have such access. Our sinful human nature prevented such ready entrance into God's presence (see Isa. 59:2). This is why God instituted the priesthood of Aaron and his sons. The priests served as intermediaries, representing the people before God and bringing God to the people (see Lev. 8:10). Indeed, the word *priest* originally meant "bridge." Priests were the means by which the people of God were able to unite with Him. This union was accomplished through the sacrifices of animals, which atoned for their sins, and connected them with God.

God directed that Aaron be the high priest. However, Aaron's role was not based on his personal character, but on the call and sovereign will of God. As we shall see, Aaron did not always exhibit exemplary leadership. Despite this, God used him. What a great lesson for us! God uses ordinary people who fail and stumble at times. Though we must never excuse sin, we know God can use individuals who are willing to place themselves at His disposal. This should encourage us to make ourselves available for the Lord's service. It should also encourage us to be patient with the shortcomings of our leaders.

### 1. AARON ORDAINED AS ISRAEL'S HIGH PRIEST

#### A. Consecration of Aaron (Exodus 28:1-3; Leviticus 8:1-9)

Exodus 28:1 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. <sup>2</sup> And thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron thy brother for glory and for beauty. <sup>3</sup> And thou shalt speak unto all that are wise hearted, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron's garments to consecrate him, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office.

Leviticus 8:6 And Moses brought Aaron and his sons, and washed them with water. <sup>7</sup> And he put upon him the coat, and girded him with the girdle, and clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod upon him, and he girded him with the curious girdle of the ephod, and bound it unto him therewith. <sup>8</sup> And he put the breastplate upon him: also he put in the breastplate the Urim and the Thummim. <sup>9</sup> And he put the mitre upon his head; also upon the mitre, even upon his forefront, did he put the golden plate, the holy crown; as the Lord commanded Moses.

We continue our study of Israel's journey from Egypt and through the wilderness. God is now preparing His people to worship Him as they travel and then continue in the Promised Land. In ancient Israel, people worshiped through prayer and singing. But the primary means of worship was through animal sacrifice. This not only provided atonement for their sins, but through that atonement, it qualified them to worship a holy God. To aid in this, the Lord gave detailed instructions about the construction of the place of worship (the Tabernacle) and the instruments of worship (including altars, a lampstand, and the ark of the covenant). The proper use of these worship items required a trained and consecrated priesthood. For this, God chose the tribe of Levi. He called Moses' brother, Aaron, to be the high priest. Aaron's four sons would serve as priests under him. The rest of the Levites were to be the priests' servants and assist them in their work.

The first order of business was to make sacred garments that only the high priest could wear. God provided skilled craftsmen to create these garments (Ex. 28:2-3). The Jews viewed these garments as having an intrinsic holiness, able to sanctify whatever they touched (see Ezek. 44:19). There were several garments for the high priest to wear. First was a *tunic* (coat, Lev. 8:6), basically a short-sleeved undergarment. This was tied with a *sash* (girdle). Over this was placed a *blue robe* (Ex.

28:31). Blue was one of the predominant colors used in the worship of Israel—along with red, white, purple, and gold (v. 5). Around the bottom edge of the robe were *golden bells* (v. 33). These were required for the priest in his ministry in the Holy of Holies (v. 35).

Over the robe was the *ephod* (Lev. 8:7). This was a sleeveless apron-like garment associated with worship and priestly ministry (see 1 Sam. 2:28; 23:6-9). On the shoulders of the ephod were *two stones* inscribed with the tribes of Israel (Ex. 28:9). This signified the high priest carried the children of Israel on his shoulders. From the stones on the shoulders, *chains* were connected to the *breastplate* (vv. 14, 25). This was a piece of cloth folded in half to form a pocket. Affixed to the front of the breastplate were *twelve stones*—indicating the high priest carried the tribes of Israel over his heart as a memorial before the Lord (v. 29). Inside the breastplate were the *Urim* and *Thummim* (Lev. 8:8). These were stones used to determine God’s will (v. 30). Aaron wore a *turban* on his head. A “gold medallion” was tied in front of this (v. 9 HCSB). Once invested with these garments, Aaron was to wear them whenever he ministered before the Lord.

When the time came to ordain Aaron and his sons, the congregation gathered before the newly constructed tabernacle. Moses washed Aaron and his sons with water (v. 6), representing their ceremonial purity—a requirement for them to minister. Then Moses clothed Aaron with the priestly garments. He took the holy anointing oil and anointed the tabernacle, the altars, and all its furnishings (vv. 10-11). Aaron and his garments were also anointed with oil (v. 12). Anointing was a dramatic and powerful ritual. It separated the priest from the congregation, acknowledging his consecration as a priest. But why oil? In Scripture, oil represents the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

—According to Exodus 28:36, what was engraved on the medallion the high priest wore? Why was this significant?

## **B. The Glory of the Lord** (Leviticus 8:35-36; 9:22-24)

8:35 Therefore shall ye abide at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation day and night seven days, and keep the charge of the Lord, that ye die not: for so I am commanded. <sup>36</sup> So Aaron and his sons did all things which the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses.

9:22 And Aaron lifted up his hand toward the people, and blessed them, and came down from offering of the sin offering, and the burnt offering, and peace offerings. <sup>23</sup> And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of the congregation, and came out, and blessed the people: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto all the people. <sup>24</sup> And there came a fire out from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces.

The consecration ceremonies lasted a full week (8:33-36). On the eighth day, Aaron began his ministry as high priest (9:1). He sacrificed offerings for both the sins of the people and as a sign of God's fellowship. After this (v. 22), he conferred blessings on the people. We don't know what he said, but perhaps he repeated Numbers 6:22-27. In response, the Lord demonstrated He was pleased with both the sacrifice and the ministry of Aaron. His glory "appeared to the whole community" (Lev. 9:23 NLT). Whatever its appearance (perhaps smoke, fire, or a cloud), it was awe-inspiring. Then to further show divine pleasure, fire came from God's presence and consumed the offering on the altar. In reverent fear and worship, the people fell on their faces before the Lord.

In all these descriptions, we see beautiful pictures of the Lord Jesus. The sins of humanity were transferred to Him, and His blood was offered on a wooden "altar." His sacrifice opened the way into the Lord's presence. He is our bridge. He is our great High Priest, interceding in Heaven for us. He is clothed in glory and splendor. And He has brought the glory and presence of God into our hearts and lives.

**Our Majestic God**

For God is, indeed, a wonderful Father who longs to pour out His mercy upon us, and whose majesty is so great that He can transform us from deep within.—Teresa of Avile

## 2. AARON ENABLES IDOLATRY

### A. Aaron Creates a Golden Idol (Exodus 32:1-14)

1 And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. 2 And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me. 3 And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron. 4 And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

In his book *No God But God*, Os Guinness says, “Idolatry is the most discussed problem in the Bible. Yet, for Christians today, it is one of the least meaningful notions. Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well-educated hearts and minds.” How true! The ancient Israelites continually struggled with the seduction of idols, and so do we; but our idols are often less obvious. They are not usually statues behind an altar but, rather, the obsessions of our hearts.

The grave nature of idolatry is no more clearly demonstrated than in the account of Aaron and the golden calf. Prior to this incident, God made a covenant with Israel, declared the Ten Commandments, and gave instructions regarding tabernacle worship. Moses had gone up to the heights of Sinai to commune with the Lord and receive further commands. Yet, he seemed “delayed” (Ex. 32:1). The people wondered what happened to him and the proposed place of worship. They wanted to worship *now*, in their own way.

Here we see a major character flaw in Aaron. He bowed to the whims of the people. He was a people-pleaser, not a God-pleaser. At their insistence, he concocted a plan. Aaron had the people

donate their gold jewelry. This was probably part of the plunder the Israelites had obtained from the Egyptians (Ex. 12:35-36). What God had provided for them as a blessing, they now turned into an act of rebellion. From this jewelry, Aaron fashioned an idol in the form of a “calf” (32:4)—a young bull. The choice of this image was significant. A number of pagan gods were represented by bulls, including the Apis bull of Egypt and the Canaanite god Baal.

The language used for this idol is ambiguous, at best. The Hebrew word for “god” or “gods” was *Elohim*. This term was most commonly used for Yahweh, the one true God. Yet they called their idol by this name (vv. 4, 23). The people claimed this calf-god had brought them out of Egypt (v. 4), and to honor it, they would hold “a feast to the Lord,” or Yahweh (v. 5). In other words, they claimed this idol was the true Lord God. Such blasphemy is hard to imagine.

To further increase their wickedness, the Israelites began to worship this idol in the licentious manner of pagan worshipers, which was full of lewd and vulgar behavior. The Israelites imitated such behavior. They offered sacrifices to the calf and indulged in “revelry” (v. 6 NIV), which connotes sexual misbehavior. This is borne out by Moses’ observation that the people were dancing (v. 19) and naked (v. 25). The Israelites held nothing back in their sinful worship.

Meanwhile, Moses was still on the mountaintop, where God informed him of what the people had done. In wrath at their wickedness, the Lord declared He regretted having delivered these people and threatened to destroy all of them and start fresh with just Moses (v. 10). But Moses interceded for the people, and the Lord relented (v. 14).

*—Why do you suppose Aaron so quickly and completely yielded to the people’s demand?*

## **B. Aaron Blames the People** (Exodus 32:15-24)

<sup>19</sup> And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. <sup>20</sup> And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the

children of Israel drink of it. <sup>21</sup> And Moses said unto Aaron, What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them? <sup>22</sup> And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my lord wax hot: thou knowest the people, that they are set on mischief. <sup>23</sup> For they said unto me, Make us gods, which shall go before us: for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. <sup>24</sup> And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.

Moses descended the mountain in great anger. When he saw the debauchery and idolatrous worship, he threw down the tablets of the Law. Even as the Ten Commandments—engraved in stone by God’s own finger—were broken, so the people had broken the Lord’s commands. In a fury, Moses took the golden calf and had it ground into powder. Then he threw the powder into nearby water and forced the people to drink the water. He showed them their god was nothing, and they must suffer the consequences of their sin.

Moses then confronted Aaron with what had occurred. Aaron responded in two ways. First, he blamed the people. He tried to excuse himself by pointing out the stubbornness of the people—as though he had no choice but to obey them. Second, he opted for a supernatural explanation (v. 24). He said when he threw the gold into the fire, out popped the calf! Surely Aaron could not have thought Moses would believe such a ludicrous story. Often sin makes individuals say and do foolish things.

Moses saw Aaron had let the people run wild (v. 25). His brother was obviously not a very effective leader. Moses then called out to the people, asking who would stand for the Lord. The Levites responded and Moses commanded them to exact judgment on the people—resulting in three thousand men being slain (vv. 26-28). After this, the Law-giver went back up the mountain to confess to God and plead for the people (vv. 31-33).

### **Great Leaders**

The difference between great leaders and ordinary people is not necessarily that one knew what to do and the other did not. It is often that they both knew what had to be done, but only one had the courage to act.—Henry Blackaby

### 3. GOD MIRACULOUSLY REAFFIRMS AARON'S PRIESTHOOD

#### A. Twelve Staffs (Numbers 17:1-7)

<sup>1</sup> And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup> Speak unto the children of Israel, and take of every one of them a rod according to the house of their fathers, of all their princes according to the house of their fathers twelve rods: write thou every man's name upon his rod. <sup>3</sup> And thou shalt write Aaron's name upon the rod of Levi: for one rod shall be for the head of the house of their fathers. <sup>4</sup> And thou shalt lay them up in the tabernacle of the congregation before the testimony, where I will meet with you. <sup>5</sup> And it shall come to pass, that the man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom: and I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you.

As Israel traveled through the wilderness, they faced many challenges, especially internally. They were chronically dissatisfied, provoking repeated punishment from God for their complaining. They also repeatedly rejected the authority of their leaders. One such incident is recorded in Numbers 16. A Levite named Korah, joined by two men named Dathan and Abiram, rose up in rebellion against the authority of Moses and Aaron. In consequence, the Lord caused the earth to open up and swallow the rebels (vv. 23-33). The Israelites reacted to God's actions in anger, eliciting further judgment from the Lord (vv. 41-49). After this, the Lord decided to settle once and for all the God-ordained leadership of Moses and Aaron; particularly, Aaron's role as the God-ordained high priest. To do this, He would perform a miracle.

In ancient times, as well as in many cultures today, a staff is an important item. A man carries a staff for various purposes—to aid in walking, to lend strength and support, and as an instrument for fighting or defense. The power and authority of a leader were represented by his staff. It is likely a ruler's scepter began as a simple rod or staff. As an emblem of one's authority, a staff (or "rod," the

words are used interchangeably) signified a person's office as a king (Gen. 49:10; Rev. 2:27), a prophet (Ex. 4:2-4), or a priest (Num. 17:3).

With this in mind, we can understand what God did next. He told Moses to have the twelve tribal leaders to gather and bring their staffs with them. Their staffs represented their tribal authority. Each tribal ruler was to write his name on his staff. (In Hebrew, the word for "staff," *matteh*, also means "tribe." Each tribe was a branch out of the stock or tree that was Israel.) For the tribe of Levi, Aaron would use his staff, with his name written on it. God said to bring these staffs into the tabernacle. The Lord would indicate His choice for high priest by causing that man's staff to sprout.

The twelve staffs were then brought into the tabernacle and placed before the ark of the covenant. The location of the staffs was probably in the Holy Place, near the altar of incense. They would not have been placed in the actual Holy of Holies since only the high priest was allowed to enter there, and only on the Day of Atonement. There before the veil, they were to remain overnight, placed before the presence and glory of Israel's God.

—*Why is it easy for "murmurings" (complaints) to arise in a church, and do they need to "cease" (v. 5)?*

## **B. Affirmation and Warning** (Numbers 17:8-11)

<sup>8</sup> And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds. <sup>9</sup> And Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord unto all the children of Israel: and they looked, and took every man his rod. <sup>10</sup> And the Lord said unto Moses, Bring Aaron's rod again before the testimony, to be kept for a token against the rebels; and thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me, that they die not. <sup>11</sup> And Moses did so: as the Lord commanded him, so did he.

The next morning, Moses went into the tabernacle. He saw that Aaron's staff had sprouted and more. It had also budded, blossomed, and produced almonds! The miracle went beyond even what the Lord had indicated would happen. How often do we see the Lord do this? He abundantly

blessees beyond all expectations. It is reminiscent of a sermon preached by G. W. Lane titled “Enough and Then Some.” Using John 7:38 as a text, Lane said, “God asks, ‘You want a drink of water? Here. Have a river.’” That is the way it is with our salvation. Christ forgives us of our sins and goes beyond this in the blessings of His grace. As Paul said in Ephesians 1:7-8, God’s redemption and forgiveness have been “lavished on us” (NIV).

Why almonds? Of all the flowering trees, why did the Lord choose to display His will through almonds? Almonds were fairly common in this area of the world. Each plant produces multitudes of beautiful pinkish-white blossoms in the early spring. However, the almond tree takes a long time to develop fruit after its initial flowery show. Other trees blossom later but produce fruit more quickly. That Aaron’s staff blossomed and developed fruit was obviously a miracle from God. What would naturally take months happened in one night!

By this miraculous sign, the Lord left no doubt as to His selection of Aaron as high priest. This was of great importance. In Numbers 18, the Lord defines the duties of the priesthood. Their ministry was of the utmost importance to Israel. Through their service, the sins of Israel were atoned and the people were able to worship the Lord. Having the right man as high priest was critical. To ensure that in the future there would be no question as to who was the legitimate high priest of Israel, Aaron’s staff was kept before the ark of God as a testimony (17:10-11).

The children of Israel now recognized their great sin. They had not only questioned the authority of God’s priest, but they had also rebelled against God himself. In a spirit of righteous fear and contrition, they cried out, “We are going to die!” (v. 12 NKJV). Yes, they did indeed deserve to die for their rebellion. Yet, the ministry of Aaron and his sons, offering sacrifices for the people, would save them from condemnation.

### **Hope of Restoration**

A particular minister was guilty of a severe moral failure. After he confessed his sin, his spiritual leaders immediately removed him from his position. There followed a program of repentance and rehabilitation that lasted for several years. Now, he is faithfully serving the Lord again. Thus, we learn that though leaders may fall, there is always hope for restoration. Also, the failure of one leader does not negate the importance of Christian ministry itself.

## **HONORING LEADERS**

Aaron's life is a dramatic example of the importance of leadership. John C. Maxwell once said, "Everything rises and falls on leadership." We see the truth of this statement demonstrated over and over in the Scriptures. The spiritual level of a group is often determined by the spiritual leadership over them. Aaron's part in the affair of the golden calf is a prime example. What if Aaron had taken a righteous stand instead of giving in to the people? Leaders need to live as godly examples to their followers. At the same time, Aaron's experiences remind us God can use imperfect leaders.

The Bible is plain—all authority is from God (Rom. 13:1). Leaders—whether in society, the church, the family, or on the job—are given by God. We must respect and follow them as they lead wisely. To rebel against godly leaders is to reject the ultimate authority of God himself. What does God require of us? We must pray for our leaders, support them, and follow them in the Lord.

### **Daily Devotions**

- M. Joseph Testifies of God's Faithfulness (Genesis 45:1-8)
- T. Gideon, an Unlikely Hero (Judges 6:11-16)
- W. God Promotes Esther (Esther 2:15-18)
- T. Godly Leaders Serve (Matthew 20:25-28)
- F. Leadership of James, Jesus' Brother (Acts 15:13-21)
- S. Shepherding the Flock of God (1 Peter 5:1-4)