

Ezekiel 44
Psalm 26
Hebrews 7

“A New Priesthood Means a New Law”

April 3, 2011

Last time we saw how the altar was to be cleansed in preparation for the sacrifices to be offered.

If you think about how this temple imagery is applied in the NT,
you start to realize what this means for us:
we must be cleansed – *we* must be consecrated –
if we are to become a fitting dwelling place for God,
if we are to become living sacrifices, pleasing to the Lord.

And even as the priests, the altar, and the temple
had to be cleansed with water and blood –
even so it is in Christ.

The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin –
he has offered the full and perfect sacrifice that atones for our sins.

And because Christ Jesus our Lord is the great priest who brings us into the holy places,
we can say with the Psalmist,

“O LORD, I love the habitation of your house
and the place where your glory dwells” (Psalm 26:8)

We gather now at the altar of the LORD
to proclaim our thanksgiving for the great sacrifice –
to tell all his wondrous deeds that he has done in Jesus.

And so let us sing Psalm 26
Read Hebrews 7

If you want to understand the concept of holiness in Ezekiel 44
think about the nuclear crisis in Japan!

Iain Duguid puts it well:

“the sanctuary was seen as a danger zone, somewhat comparable to a nuclear power plant...

Access to some areas of the site is strictly limited,
and special clothing has to be worn for some processes to prevent lethal contact
between those operating the plant and the radioactive material,
and to prevent radioactivity being transmitted by them to the outside world.

In an analogous way, the priests had to take special care in their dress and their conduct
to avoid danger to themselves and to prevent dangerous levels of holiness
being brought into contact with the general public.” (p504)

In the light of the catastrophic meltdown of the temple under the kings,
you can understand why Ezekiel is so concerned for “safety” in the new temple!

The glory of God will consume all those who are improperly clothed.

If you are not clothed in Christ and his righteousness, then the radiation of God’s holiness
will destroy you!

Introduction: The East Gate (44:1-3)

¹*Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east. And it was shut.*

Until now, Ezekiel has been using the word “house” to refer to the temple.
But now he uses the word sanctuary.

Why?

Because until now, the temple was merely a house – a building.
But now the house has become a sanctuary – a holy place –
because the glory of the LORD has filled it!
and because the altar has been consecrated!

²*And the LORD said to me, "This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered by it. Therefore it shall remain shut.*

In Solomon’s temple, there was only one gate – the east gate –
and so the east gate would be the way *everyone* would enter the temple precincts.
(think of Psalm 118 – “this the gate of the LORD – the righteous shall enter through it”)

But now there are three gates, and the east gate remains shut.
The gate of the LORD is closed.

³*Only the prince may sit in it to eat bread before the LORD. He shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate, and shall go out by the same way."*

The east gate has been consecrated by the glory of the LORD.

But even the prince may not enter the inner court.

He has a special place in the outer court –
the prince alone may eat bread before the LORD in the vestibule of the gate
(the eastern gate of the outer court) –
but as a lay man he may not enter the inner court.

He must enter by the north or south gate, and eat bread in the vestibule of the east gate.
The temple is not a royal chapel for the prince.

Ezekiel is very clear that *no mere man* may enter the gate of the LORD.

And truly, there is only *one* who is able to enter the gate of the LORD.

Jesus alone – the one who is true God and true man – may come before the Father.

If you try to enter the heavenlies *apart* from Christ,
you will be destroyed – just like Nadab and Abihu.
The heavenly radiation will utterly consume you!

But *in Christ* we enter the holy of holies through the gate of the LORD!

Ezekiel, however, has to go back in through the north gate! (v4)

1. The Glory of the LORD and the Law of the Temple (44:4-5)

⁴Then he brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple, and I looked, and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple of the LORD. And I fell on my face.

In chapter 43 Ezekiel fell on face when he saw the glory of the LORD fill the temple.
Now he falls on his face once again!

How do you respond to the glory of the LORD?

Some say that falling on one's face is an OT response –
but when John, the beloved disciple, sees Jesus in Revelation 1:17,
John falls on his face (as though dead)!

How do you respond to the glory of the LORD?

How do you respond to the glorified Jesus?

The glory of the LORD has filled the temple –
as our Lord Jesus has sent his Spirit upon his church –
and we should respond by falling on our faces and worshipping him!

⁵And the LORD said to me, "Son of man, mark well, see with your eyes, and hear with your ears all that I shall tell you concerning all the statutes of the temple of the LORD and all its laws. And mark well the entrance to the temple and all the exits from the sanctuary.

The first part of verse 5 is almost identical to 40:4,
where God introduced the temple vision by saying,
"Son of man, see with your eyes, and hear with your ears
and mark well all that I show you."

And the content of what Ezekiel hears is virtually identical to 43:11.

In other words, this second part of Ezekiel's vision – focusing on the laws and statutes –
connects clearly with the first part – the vision of the temple.

As we saw last time, Ezekiel is the only book outside of the Five Books of Moses
that gives prescriptive legislation.

Ezekiel makes it clear that with a new covenant (ch 36)
comes a new temple (ch 40-42),
a new priesthood (ch 44)
and a new law (ch 43-46).

As Hebrews 7:12 puts it, "when there is a change in the priesthood,
there is necessarily a change in the law as well."

Ezekiel 40-43 describes the new temple – like Exodus 25-40 described the tabernacle.
Now, chapters 44-46 parallel Leviticus/Numbers.

Ezekiel is a new Moses –

the vision of the glory of the LORD entering the new temple (like Exodus 40)
is followed by an oral revelation of Torah – of laws and statutes, (like Lev./Num.)
with Ezekiel as the mediator of the new covenant law.

And the LORD starts with the reason for this new law.

The reason is because of the *breaking* of the old covenant law.

2. The Problem of the Past: Profaning Sacred Space through Foreigners (44:6-8)

⁶And say to the rebellious house, to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: O house of Israel, enough of all your abominations, ⁷in admitting foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, to be in my sanctuary, profaning my temple, when you offer to me my food, the fat and the blood. You have broken my covenant, in addition to all your abominations. ⁸And you have not kept charge of my holy things, but you have set others to keep my charge for you in my sanctuary.

Earlier in Ezekiel we heard all about Israel's sin and abominations.

But here in chapter 44, there is only one sin that God focuses on:

you allowed foreigners – uncircumcised in heart and flesh –

to enter the sanctuary – and even to “keep charge of my holy things.”

We aren't given the details of how exactly this happened –

but it is such a horrific crime that God concludes:

“you have broken my covenant, in addition to all your abominations.”

The Levites had neglected their sacred duties,

and so Israel brought in foreigners to replace them.

Now, it's true that the duties of the Levites were not exactly glamorous!

They were to guard the temple and assist in the sacrifices.

Standing guard, slaughtering animals and doing menial tasks

is not exactly my idea of a good time,

so I have some sympathy with the Levites!

But menial tasks are often what God calls us to!

And in the case of the Levites,

failure to do menial tasks rendered God's covenant null and void!

The covenant was broken.

Foreigners – those who were uncircumcised in heart and flesh –

took over the menial tasks surrounding the worship of God.

And God says that this failure in worship was so abominable

that it broke his covenant!

Perhaps you can understand why the early church required all the unbaptized

to leave after the sermon and before the Lord's Supper.

They were allowed to come and hear the Word of God,
but they were not permitted to remain when the church partook of the sacrifice of Christ.

If you think in terms of Paul's admonition about remaining separate from unbelievers,
it may help you understand why most churches insist
that only those who are baptized and in good standing
may "attend" to the incidentals of worship (e.g., ushers, musicians, etc.).

3. The Solution for the Future: Protecting Sacred Space by Levites and Priests (44:9-16)

⁹"Thus says the Lord GOD: No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter my sanctuary. ¹⁰But the Levites who went far from me, going astray from me after their idols when Israel went astray, shall bear their punishment. ¹¹They shall be ministers in my sanctuary, having oversight at the gates of the temple and ministering in the temple. They shall slaughter the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall stand before the people, to minister to them. ¹²Because they ministered to them before their idols and became a stumbling block of iniquity to the house of Israel, therefore I have sworn concerning them, declares the Lord GOD, and they shall bear their punishment. ¹³They shall not come near to me, to serve me as priest, nor come near any of my holy things and the things that are most holy, but they shall bear their shame and the abominations that they have committed. ¹⁴Yet I will appoint them to keep charge of the temple, to do all its service and all that is to be done in it.

Verses 10-14 explain the duties of the Levites.

The Levites are to take charge of guard duty
and slaughter the burnt offering and the sacrifice (the peace offering)
and minister on behalf of the people who bring offerings.

Now, from the tone of verses 10-14, you might think that the Levites were being demoted
but in fact, they are being promoted!

According to the Mosaic law,
the priests would guard the temple and the people would slaughter the animal.
The Levites were little more than glorified servants.

According to Ezekiel, the Levites will now take on a larger role.
They will take on the guarding function of the priests
and the slaughtering function of the people.
Indeed, the Levites now will act on behalf of the people.
The people may not enter the inner court.
They must remain outside, while the Levite brings the offering to the priest.

All Israel has failed to keep the holy place holy.
As we saw at the beginning of Ezekiel,
the people of Israel (and even the priests) were guilty of idolatry,
bringing the vilest abominations into the holy place.

And so in the new covenant, God will make sure that nothing unclean will enter his sanctuary.

This is what Paul is talking about in 2 Corinthians 6:16-18

“What agreement has the temple of God with idols?

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them,
says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing;

then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.’”

Some churches have hired unbelieving musicians so that their music will be “professional.”

Given that the musicians in the temple were Levites and priests,

it is clear that any biblical warrant for musicians would also include the idea

that musicians are playing a support role in the worship of God –

and that hiring unbelievers in that role

would violate the sanctity of God’s holy temple.

Verses 15-16 then turn to the priests.

¹⁵“But the Levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept the charge of my sanctuary when the people of Israel went astray from me, shall come near to me to minister to me. And they shall stand before me to offer me the fat and the blood, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶They shall enter my sanctuary, and they shall approach my table, to minister to me, and they shall keep my charge.

What about Aaron?

It is possible that all the other Aaronic lines had died out or intermarried in such a way
as to disqualify them from priestly service.

But it is also possible that the *sin* of the other Aaronic clans is in view –

and so the rest of Aaron’s sons *are* in fact demoted to “Levites.”

This may explain why it *sounds* like the Levites are being demoted,

when in fact they have a more expanded role than they did in Moses’ day.

The sons of Zadok were the most faithful of the priests during the apostasy,

and so they alone retain the priestly title.

The rest of the sons of Aaron are demoted to “Levites.”

But note the contrasts between Levites and Zadokites:

Whereas the Levites were forbidden to approach the LORD,

the Zadokite priests are commanded to come near.

Whereas the Levites would stand before the people and serve them,

the Zadokite priests would stand before the LORD and present his food offerings,
the fat and the blood.

Whereas Levites could perform guard duty at the gates of the sanctuary,

the Zadokite priests are the guardians of Yahweh himself

(“they shall keep/guard my charge”).

So there is still a basic “Mosaic” shape to Ezekiel’s distinctions between the priests and Levites.
With one exception.

There is no high priest!

For a law that is so preoccupied with maintaining holiness and separation –
it is somewhat curious that there is no reference to a high priest –
and no reference to whether *anyone* is allowed to enter the Most Holy Place!

One could argue that Ezekiel assumes this –
but given the differences between Moses and Ezekiel,
it is not a safe assumption.

After all, Ezekiel is seeing the new covenant through Mosaic eyes.

We now know that in the new covenant – the new temple that Ezekiel saw –
the high priest is the one who offered himself as the atoning sacrifice
that brings us to God!

We come near to God – not because we have done so well,
but because our Lord Jesus Christ is the faithful priest who has opened the way
into the heavenly holy of holies for all who hope and trust in him!

The rest of chapter 44 then lays out regulations for the Zadokite priests.

4. Regulations for the Zadokite Priests (44:17-31)

We start with the “visible holiness” of the priests in verses 17-22.

One could refer to this as “outward” holiness –
and certainly the emphasis here is on the external conduct and appearance of the priest,
but I call it *visible* holiness,
because the point is that the priest should be an exemplary Israelite.

a. The Visible Holiness of the Priests (v17-22)

¹⁷*When they enter the gates of the inner court, they shall wear linen garments. They shall have nothing of wool on them, while they minister at the gates of the inner court, and within.* ¹⁸*They shall have linen turbans on their heads, and linen undergarments around their waists. They shall not bind themselves with anything that causes sweat.*

Verses 17-18 forbid clothes that cause priests to sweat.

Priests are to be dressed in linen garments – at least when they are serving in the temple.
There is no reference to the purple, blue and scarlet yarns from Exodus 39.

These appear to be made of plain linen.

¹⁹*And when they go out into the outer court to the people, they shall put off the garments in which they have been ministering and lay them in the holy chambers. And they shall put on other garments, lest they transmit holiness to the people with their garments.*

Verse 19 then says that these holy garments must remain in the holy places, lest the priests “transmit holiness to the people with their garments.”

Why does Ezekiel object to transmitting holiness to the people?

The temple is the place where earth and heaven meet.

And if the holiness of God should come in contact with the uncleanness of man, then man will be destroyed!

Therefore you really *don't* want the priests to wear their holy garments in the streets – because the holiness of God is a destroying power.

Think of what happens when the ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines.

Last time we talked about Ichabod –

the child who was born on the day when the ark of the LORD was captured;
the child whose name means “no glory.”

When the holy ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines, the ark caused death and destruction amongst the Philistines.

The holiness of God destroys the unclean.

Think about 1 Corinthians 11 in this light.

Paul says that some of the Corinthians had *died*

because they failed to discern the Lord's body in the Lord's Supper.

Notice that Paul assumes the priesthood of all believers here –

all of us come into the holy places in Christ –

but those who come apart from faith, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Because they despise the church of God – because they treat the holy food as common – some people have died.

²⁰ *They shall not shave their heads or let their locks grow long; they shall surely trim the hair of their heads.* ²¹ *No priest shall drink wine when he enters the inner court.* ²² *They shall not marry a widow or a divorced woman, but only virgins of the offspring of the house of Israel, or a widow who is the widow of a priest.*

Verses 20-22 give regulations regarding the priest's conduct.

He shall trim his hair.

He shall not drink wine when he enters the inner court
(he shall not drink when he is “on duty.”)

He shall marry only Israelite virgins, or priestly widows.

In other words, a priest should be an exemplary Israelite, both in appearance and in conduct.

Verses 23-27 then speak of the duties of the Zadokite priests.

b. The Duties of the Priests (v23-27)

²³ They shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean. ²⁴ In a dispute, they shall act as judges, and they shall judge it according to my judgments. They shall keep my laws and my statutes in all my appointed feasts, and they shall keep my Sabbaths holy. ²⁵ They shall not defile themselves by going near to a dead person. However, for father or mother, for son or daughter, for brother or unmarried sister they may defile themselves. ²⁶ After he has become clean, they shall count seven days for him. ²⁷ And on the day that he goes into the Holy Place, into the inner court, to minister in the Holy Place, he shall offer his sin offering, declares the Lord GOD.

There are three things that Ezekiel says the priests are to do:

First, he priests are to serve as the teachers of the people –
teaching the difference between the holy and the common,
the unclean and the clean (like Leviticus 10:10-11).

Second, the priests are to serve as judges in disputes –
since they are the ones best instructed in Torah.

And third, the priests are to served as models of obedience.
“they shall keep my laws and my statutes in all my appointed feasts,
and they shall keep my Sabbaths holy.”

In other words, *preaching Christ* is not enough.

Priests must also *live* the same gospel that they preach.

It is really interesting to note the parallels to Paul’s instructions regarding bishops:
husband of one wife,
not a drunkard,
able to teach,
blameless... (1 Tim 3)

Indeed, while one should not push the similarities too far,
you can see a similar impetus in Acts 6 when the apostles set apart the Seven
to take care of administrative matters in Jerusalem,
so that they can focus on the ministry of the word and prayer.

The precise functions of the priests and levites are not taken directly over into the NT church,
but 1 Timothy 3 follows the same conceptual distinction with the bishop –
who speaks on behalf of God to the people –
and the deacon – who serves on behalf of the people.

All Christians have equal access to the Most Holy Place in Jesus Christ.

But this equality of access to God does not negate all distinctions of office in the church.

Paul will speak of this in terms of differences of gifting by the Holy Spirit.

The same Spirit gives different gifts to different people
with the result that the whole body functions harmoniously
when every part of the body functions properly.

Verses 28-31 then deal with the inheritance of the priests:

c. The Inheritance of the Priests (v28-31)

²⁸ *"This shall be their inheritance: I am their inheritance: and you shall give them no possession in Israel; I am their possession.* ²⁹ *They shall eat the grain offering, the sin offering, and the guilt offering, and every devoted thing in Israel shall be theirs.* ³⁰ *And the first of all the firstfruits of all kinds, and every offering of all kinds from all your offerings, shall belong to the priests. You shall also give to the priests the first of your dough, that a blessing may rest on your house.* ³¹ *The priests shall not eat of anything, whether bird or beast, that has died of itself or is torn by wild animals.*

In Exodus God had declared that Israel was his firstborn son –
and God gave Israel an inheritance – the promised land.

But the priests did not receive a piece of real estate for their inheritance.

As God said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance; you shall have no portion;
I am your portion and your inheritance in the midst of the sons of Israel”
(Numbers 18:20)

Now God repeats this: I am their inheritance...I am their possession.

What this means is fleshed out in verses 29-30 –

The priests are fed at Yahweh’s table.

Everything that is brought to the LORD (except the burnt offering, of course!)
is eaten by the priests.

This list is entirely consistent with Numbers 18,
and concludes with the promise that if Israel provides well for the priests,
then the blessing of God will remain on the house of Israel.

Verse 31 is connected to this:

the priests are to eat at God’s table – and are not to eat unclean foods.

Paul applies this principle to the NT ministry as well.

“Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service
get their food from the temple,
and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings?

In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel
should get their living by the gospel.” (1 Corinthians 9:13-14)

It is important to note that the OT priesthood was separated from the land.

Unlike the landed priests of Egypt who were independently wealthy,
the priests of Israel were dependent upon the faithfulness of God’s people.

It is quite appropriate that my ability to feed my family
depends entirely on your faithfulness in the area of tithes and offerings.

I’ve been teaching medieval history this year in the Academy,

and it has been interesting to see how the medieval church departed from this.

The church became the largest single landholder in Europe.

And those who suggested that the ministry
should be dependent upon the faithfulness of the people of God
were branded as heretics!

One feature of the modern system of church finance, though,
is the creation of a “church budget.”

In OT times – and in NT times until the 1800s –
there was a much more personal connection.

The congregation gave their gifts directly to the pastor (or priest in the OT).
There might be a Levite or a churchwarden who did the actual collecting,
but often enough you would bring a load of wood to the pastor’s house,
or a sack of grain, or a fattened calf.

I’m not sure that our impersonal culture could handle
a sudden reversion to that more personal way of doing things
(and I’m quite sure that the IRS would have a cow!),
but it would be good for you to think of the fact that in your gifts and offerings
you are providing for your pastor –
as well as for a number of levitical services in this place,
and for other pastors and deacons around the world.

But of course, there is another way in which we must also understand verses 28-31.
Because *all of us* are priests – and all of us can rightly say
that the LORD is our inheritance!

In your baptism, you have been consecrated as a royal priesthood –
and God himself is now your inheritance!

An OT priest was consecrated by the sprinkling of blood and the washing of water.

Heb. 10:19-22 describes our entrance into the Christian life as a form of priestly consecration:
“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,
by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain,
that is, through his flesh,
and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience
and our bodies washed with pure water.”

And that is what we do today in the baptism of Abigail, Aidan, and Andrew.