

Lesson 4 | September 22, 2024

Aaron: The First Priest of Israel

Study Text: Exodus 28:1–5; 32:1–35; Leviticus 8:1 through 9:24; Numbers 17:1–11

Central Truth: God sets apart and works through people who dedicate their lives to Him.

Key Verse: Leviticus 9:23

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 (KJV).

Moses and Aaron went into the Tabernacle, and when they came back out, they blessed the people again, and the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole community (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will analyze the structure of the Israelite priesthood and appreciate their own church leaders.
- Students will support leaders who bear spiritual responsibility for them before God.
- Students will affirm that even the best church leaders are imperfect copies of Jesus, our ultimate High Priest.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: Have you ever served pizza on fine china? Have you ever worn a tuxedo or evening gown to a dental appointment? Have you ever rented a limo for your Monday morning commute? Probably not! We usually save these kinds of amenities for special occasions.

Discussion Starter—Set Apart

Say: What are some things in your home that are set apart for special use?

Say: In his second letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “In a wealthy home some utensils are made of gold and silver, and some are made of wood and clay. The expensive utensils are used for special occasions, and the cheap ones are for everyday use. If you keep yourself pure, you will be a special utensil for honorable use. Your life will be clean, and you will be ready for the Master to use you for every good work” (2 Timothy 2:20–21). God has always chosen to set apart certain people for His own special use. Today, we’re going to take a closer look at one of them: Moses’ brother Aaron.

During their time in the wilderness, God gave His people instructions about how they should approach Him. Because of God’s holiness, not just anybody could get close to

His presence. Instead, the Israelites needed someone who was set apart for service. Moses' brother Aaron was the person God chose to be Israel's first high priest and the intermediary between God and His people. Of course, Jesus is our "great High Priest" (Hebrews 4:14) who "offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time" (10:12). But examining Aaron's priesthood helps believers more fully understand and appreciate Jesus' role as sacrifice and mediator.

Part 1—Aaron Ordained as Israel's High Priest Set Apart and Consecrated

Exodus 28:1

Say: As we dive into Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers today, we'll see how much the specific elements of the priesthood mattered to God. Those who would enter His presence on the people's behalf were to be consecrated and wholly devoted to His service—even down to the smallest detail.

The priesthood was God's idea. The Hebrew word for *priest* describes a sort of two-way intermediary that serves between God and His people. In Exodus 28:1, God called Aaron and his sons to serve in this role, which would continue to pass down through their family line. This was more than a job; it was a commissioned office that carried weight and authority.

The rest of Exodus 28 describes the elaborate garments Aaron and his sons were to wear in their service to God. The stakes were high, and no detail was to be overlooked—on pain of death (verses 35, 43). The priests were to listen to and obey God as He taught the Israelites what it meant to be His people. God's plan to establish Israel as an example to the nations around them was far too important to be derailed by disobedient priests. They were to be examples to everyone of strict obedience to God's commands. In fact, when Aaron's two oldest sons later failed to follow God's rules for burning incense in His presence, "fire blazed forth from the Lord's presence and burned them up, and they died there before the Lord" (Leviticus 10:2).

Just as Israel's priests were set apart for the Lord's service, Jesus' followers are "a chosen people . . . royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession" called to "show others the goodness of God" (1 Peter 2:9). Because of Jesus, we can take off our old clothes—the sinful, corrupt way we used to live—and put on our new clothes—the holiness that comes from the Spirit working in us (Ephesians 4:21–24). The good deeds that we do as a result will "shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise [our] heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16).

Resource Packet Item 1: Sacrifices in the Tabernacle

This handout describes the various sacrifices that Aaron and the other priests regularly offered in the tabernacle. Students will reflect on the meaning of Jesus' once-and-for-all sacrifice and list ways to present themselves as living sacrifices to God.

Discuss

- Why do you think it was necessary for the priests' sacred garments to be "glorious and beautiful" (Exodus 28:2)?
- In what specific ways can you keep yourself pure and clean so you are ready for God's service (2 Timothy 2:20–21)?

The Ordination Ceremony

Leviticus 8:1–9, 36; 9:22–24

Say: The priestly ordination ceremony reminds us that God is the One who sets the rules for fellowship, worship, and holiness. To be effective workers in His kingdom, we must be "made right with God" (Romans 3:25) and continually made "holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word" (Ephesians 5:26).

God's directions for the ceremony to dedicate Aaron and his sons were initially given in Exodus 28 to 40, but the record of their being carried out is found in Leviticus 8 and 9. Aaron and his sons could not serve as mediators between God and His people until they were consecrated. The consecration ceremony was carried out in public according to God's specific instructions. Like the priestly office itself, the ordination ceremony was not Moses' idea, but God's. Following His directions to the letter would keep the priests and, by extension, the people from drifting into paganism like the peoples surrounding them. Each feature of the ceremony held significance:

- *Ritual washing* (Leviticus 8:6) symbolized the cleansing required to stand in God's holy presence (Isaiah 6:1–7). Jesus has provided this cleansing for the Church (Acts 22:16; Ephesians 5:25–26), allowing us to confidently approach God (Hebrews 10:21–22).
- *Priestly garments* (Leviticus 8:7–9) emphasized the sacredness of meeting with God (Exodus 28:43) and the representative nature of the priesthood (verses 9–12). Aaron's family and tribe would stand before God on behalf of all twelve tribes of Israel, and their clothes would reveal that role to others.
- *Anointing oil* (Leviticus 8:10–13) symbolized consecration, holiness, and being set apart. Even the recipe for making this oil was prescribed by God (Exodus 30:22–33).
- *Sacrificial offerings* (Leviticus 8:14–30) included several details that would have reminded the Israelites that they belonged to the one true God:
 - They sacrificed bulls and rams, both of which were worshipped by Egyptians.
 - They burned the animals' entrails, in contrast to other Near Eastern cultures that used them for divination.
 - They offered unleavened bread (Leviticus 8:26). This could have signified a rejection of Egypt, where some believe the leavening process was invented.

Each element of the consecration service illustrated the holiness of God and His plan to connect with His people by purifying certain individuals as their representatives.

Although we can enter God’s presence freely because of Jesus, the Israelite priesthood reminds us of the holy “other-ness” of God. To stand before Him, we must clothe ourselves in Jesus’ righteousness and leave every sin behind (Colossians 3:5–10).

Discuss

- What insights into God’s holiness can we find in Leviticus 8?
- How are believers anointed for God’s service today?

Part 2—Aaron Enables Idolatry

Aaron Yields to the People

Exodus 32:1–10

Say: When the people of Israel impatiently demanded that Aaron create an idol for them to follow, he became caught up in their sin. As we know all too well, respected and admired leaders can still be drawn into sin today. Godly leaders must always remain faithful to God, rather than allowing themselves to be coerced by the people they lead.

When we better understand God’s holiness as illustrated in the detailed priestly consecration ceremony, the events of Exodus 32 take on new significance. Despite the miraculous events they had witnessed months before—like the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea—the Israelites brazenly engaged in idol worship.

With a disrespectful command to their high priest, the people complained about how long Moses had been meeting with God on the mountain. Contrast their perspective with God’s: “How quickly they have turned away from the way I commanded them to live!” (verse 8). What seemed to be a long time to the people was a short time to God. How often God’s people—including us—question His timing! Even when we have personally witnessed God’s miraculous power, we can still be “drawn away by [our] own lust, and enticed” (James 1:14, KJV).

Aaron was persuaded to go along with the people’s demands. Although it appears he may have tried to slow down the chaos that was unfolding—requiring them to donate their own gold (verse 2) and telling them to wait until tomorrow (verse 5)—he gave in to the crowd. Aaron’s intent may not have been as straightforward as it appears, but Moses’ question in verse 21 makes it clear that Aaron was in the wrong: “What did these people do to you to make you bring such terrible sin upon them?”

Aaron passed the blame to the people (verse 22), but it appears from the series of events described in verses 1–6 he was making decisions based on his fear of losing their support—or even his fear of a violent mob—rather than on his commitment to God and his own role as priest. The golden calf (or more accurately, the golden bull) was celebrated as Yahweh, and the Israelites declared this being was the One who delivered them from Egypt. Verse 6 describes how the people eagerly “got up early the next morning” and celebrated with feasting and drinking that eventually devolved into a

sexual frenzy. (The word translated “indulged in pagan revelry” [NLT] or “rose up to play” [KJV] is used in a clearly sexual context in Genesis 26:8 and 39:14.)

Clearly, the people’s behavior was utterly abominable to God. In fact, He told Moses that He intended to destroy them. “Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation” (Exodus 32:10).

Resource Packet Item 2: Dealing with Impatience

Witnessing the miraculous was not enough to keep the Israelites from losing patience with Moses and choosing to worship an idol instead of the one true God. Students will read three biblical examples of impatience and think about the consequences of hasty decisions.

Discuss

- How have you seen impatience lead to sin in your life or someone else’s?
- What are some reasons that leaders might allow people to push them into bad decisions?

Moses Stands in the Gap

Exodus 32:11–24

Say: In his weakness, Aaron failed to keep the Israelites from idolatry and debauchery. But Moses stood in the gap for God’s people, reminding Him of the covenant He’d established with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 32:11–13).

God would have been justified in destroying the Israelites for their sin. After all, they had broken their covenant with Him (Exodus 19:3–8). But instead of rejoicing in God’s offer, Moses “tried to pacify the Lord his God” (32:11). Exemplifying sacrificial leadership, he interceded for Israel, choosing to stick his neck out for these stiff-necked people. He reminded God of three things that caused Him to change His mind (verse 14):

1. These people were still God’s people—the same ones He had miraculously brought out of Egypt (verse 11).
2. The Egyptians would think God was evil for rescuing the people from slavery only to destroy them in the wilderness (verse 12).
3. God had established a covenant with the Israelites, promising that He would multiply their descendants and give them the Promised Land (verse 13).

The Psalmist, when retelling this incident in Psalm 106, noted Moses’ role as intercessor, declaring he “stepped between the Lord and the people,” begging God to not destroy the people (verse 23). We should be encouraged by this truth: Leaders can intercede on behalf of their people, petitioning God for something that would not otherwise occur.

Moses descended from the mountain, furious at the people’s faithlessness and Aaron’s lack of leadership. “Aaron had let the people get completely out of control, much to the

amusement of their enemies” (Exodus 32:25). God’s holiness had been violated and His people had been shamed. The consequences would be severe: “about 3,000 people died that day” (verse 28).

Resource Packet Item 3: Pentecost Parallel

The origins of the Feast of Pentecost can be traced back to the time God gave the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1). This handout describes the parallels between the giving of the Law and the giving of the Spirit.

Discuss

- In what ways does sin violate God’s holiness and bring shame on His people?
- How might this passage encourage you to intercede with greater faith?

Part 3—God Miraculously Reaffirms Aaron’s Priesthood

Aaron’s Leadership Challenged

Numbers 17:1–4

Say: While all believers are set apart for God’s service in the general sense, He ordains specific people to lead (Numbers 16:5; Ephesians 4:11–12). It is a form of rebellion to undermine or overthrow a godly spiritual leader. May God help us honor the leaders He has placed over us. And if we are called to lead, may He help us lead with diligence (Romans 12:8).

Of all the unexpected outcomes in today’s lesson, this is perhaps the most astounding. Even after Aaron created the golden calf, he was still set apart as high priest. And then when his leadership was challenged, God reaffirmed his call. We know from the full counsel of God’s Word that He holds leaders to a higher standard (see James 3:1), but God chose to show extravagant mercy to Aaron.

This account follows yet another sin of the Israelites—the rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16:1–40). Korah and his conspirators, along with 250 prominent Israelite leaders, charged Moses and Aaron with overstepping the limits of their leadership (verse 3). Korah was part of the tribe of Levi and would have served in the tabernacle, but he apparently wanted more authority.

Moses responded by falling “face down on the ground” (verse 4), presumably showing humility. He was neither defensive nor proud, but he simply laid the matter before God, who soon made His choice abundantly clear (verses 31–35). Soon after, the people were questioning Moses and Aaron’s actions during the rebellion, and that led to a plague breaking out (verses 41–50). After the plague was over, God told Moses the people were to bring a wooden staff “from each leader of Israel’s ancestral tribes, and inscribe each leader’s name on his staff” (17:2). As the high priest, Aaron would bring a staff to represent the tribe of Levi (verse 3). The staffs would be placed in front of the ark of the covenant, and God himself would verify who was in charge.

Just as in Moses and Aaron's time, God still sets apart some of His people to serve in leadership roles, such as pastors and other church leaders. It can be intimidating for any leader to stand up to those who would question their authority or anointing, but those who have been appointed by God can rest in His sovereignty. As they care for the flock God entrusts to them, they rest in the promise they "will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor" from the Great Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4).

Discuss

- Is it ever appropriate to challenge a church leader's authority? Why or why not?
- How should you respond if your pastor or other church leader is under attack?

Affirmed by God

Numbers 17:5–8

Say: Those who undermine the authority of God-ordained leaders are actually rebelling against God himself. And as we have seen in this lesson so far, that choice comes with serious consequences.

When the leaders of Israel brought their wooden staffs to the tabernacle and laid them before the ark of the covenant, God gave an answer that could not be questioned. If God had simply made Aaron's staff bud—showing the merest hints of life—while the other staffs remained dead or dormant, skeptics could have argued that it was a coincidence. But God caused the staff to come to life, completely contradicting the rules of the natural world. Not only did this dead branch produce buds, but it "sprouted, budded, blossomed, and produced ripe almonds!" (Numbers 17:8).

Aaron's staff had been a key element in the miracles in Egypt (Exodus 7:10), and again God used Aaron's staff to prove that he was the chosen high priest. Likewise, God sees the challenges His appointed leaders face today, and He is the One who validates their leadership through whatever means He may choose).

Discuss

- Aaron's staff was one of the three items eventually placed within the ark of the covenant (Hebrews 9:4). Why do you think it was kept in such a significant place?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: The priesthood and all the details surrounding it were God's idea. He was the One who ordained Aaron to be the Israelites' spiritual leader. In one sense, all believers are "royal priests" (1 Peter 2:9) and represent Christ to a fallen world. In another sense, leaders carry a special weight of responsibility and authority placed upon them by God. Those who challenge the authority of an ordained spiritual leader—without a spirit of humility and cooperation—could find themselves in direct opposition to God himself.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Make a list of ways you can actively support those who are ordained to lead you. Then do one or two of the things on your list this week.
- Whether you are currently a leader in your church or not, commit to follow the direction of God alone rather than bowing to pressure from other people.
- The next time you hear someone disparage a church leader, choose to speak up on their behalf.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Joseph Testifies of God's
Faithfulness. Genesis 45:1–8

Tuesday:

Gideon, an Unlikely Hero.
Judges 6:11–16

Wednesday:

God Promotes Esther.
Esther 2:15–18

Thursday:

Godly Leaders Serve.
Matthew 20:25–28

Friday:

Leadership of James, Jesus' Brother.
Acts 15:13–21

Saturday:

Shepherding the Flock of God.
1 Peter 5:1–4