

Exodus 28:9-14

'Gems from the Garments of Glory' (4)

We're turning back again this evening to Exodus 28 ... we're at number four in our studies on the garments of the high priest - we're calling it: **Gems from the Garments of Glory**. You will recall from our first study that we are following the order that is mentioned in 28:4 ...

so we've already looked at the breastplate of twelve precious stones - we were blessed as we realised afresh that he has us on his heart - yes, we are loved by him and supported by him at all times and in every season of life; last week, we reflected on the multicoloured outer garment, the ephod - our hearts were encouraged when we glimpsed his amazing ability to do so much on our behalf. In one sense, every name and every title he wears is a blessing he shares!

Over the last few years I've grown to love and appreciate the words of the hymn penned by Charitie Bancroft ... sadly, like so many of these great old songs, it was dying a death and it lay dormant for far too long, until it was tweaked and given the kiss of life by the folks at Sovereign Grace Music - now we sing its glorious truths all the time ... you'll know it, I'm sure:

Before the throne of God above, I have a strong and perfect plea; A great high priest whose name is love, Who ever lives and pleads for me. My name is graven on his hands, My name is written on his heart; I know that while in heaven he stands, No tongue can bid me thence depart.

The next stanza is one that resonates with all of us as we wrestle with the challenges of this life: *When Satan tempts me to despair, And tells me of the guilt within; Upward I look and see him there, Who made an end to all my sin. Because the sinless Saviour died, My sinful soul is counted free, For God the just is satisfied, To look on him and pardon me!*

And, you know, this is all part and parcel of the ongoing ministry of Jesus, our Great High Priest. We've discovered that so far in our three studies - it's all about Him - who he is and what he does; this evening, as we focus on the two onyx stones - one on either shoulder - your faith and mine will be affirmed and strengthened because he is able to keep us!

I don't want to scare you off, but there are nine main points this evening - they all begin with the letter O ...

Mark the oneness here ...

You will see from the PP slide that the onyx stone is on the left shoulder - there's another one on the right side, exactly the same, aside from the names inscribed on it. Both stones are identical in shape and size and colour - there is no difference between them at all.

On the breastplate, it wasn't like that at all - it had twelve different stones with the names of the twelve tribes inscribed on them - signifying the reality that in his body, the church, there are

many members - each with a responsibility to reflect something of his beauty.

With that thought in mind, we share a common salvation - Jude speaks of that in verse 3 of his tiny epistle ... our sins, all of them, are under the blood of the Lamb of God - one sacrifice for sins for ever. And we serve a common Saviour - for you and I, we are called to follow him, then we are commissioned to serve him in the rough and tumble of everyday life - we labour for his cause and we invest our energy into kingdom work, be that at home or out there in the public square.

Then, we speak a common story - we have one string to our bow, as it were, and that is the message of the cross. Good enough for Paul, good enough for me! There is no other message other than Christ crucified ... At the end of the journey, we salute a common state - eternity, heaven, the home of the redeemed, where the saints from all the ages will gather and together we shall worship the Lamb upon the throne!

You see, dear friends, even though we are as different as chalk and cheese, we have so much in common! So, when the high priest went into the holy place to minister on their behalf, the stones on his shoulders spoke of their oneness - for you and me, we're not all the same, but we are 'all one in Christ Jesus.'

Mark the order here ...

We read in verse 10 that their names are graven on the onyx stones 'in the order of their birth.' That's fairly straightforward, isn't it - that's the

only reason they were there! They were born - all sons of Jacob, we read of them in Genesis 49 where he blessed them, one by one, as he knew that his time was almost up.

On the right shoulder, there are six names - there is Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, and Naphtali ... on the left, another six names - there is Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and last but not least, Benjamin.

The same holds true for you and me - we are no different for we read in Romans 3 that we are all born the same way as sinners - the psalmist David said that we were 'born in sin' - we are sinners at birth, sinners by nature, and sinners in practice. The ground is level for all of us.

And it's no different when we are born again by the Spirit of God and brought into the global family of God ... for you and I, we have been on different paths in our lead up to Calvary, but the way of the cross leads home ...

Did you notice that all twelve names are there - none are missing, none are deliberately left off the listing - some of the boys were goody-goody, some were notoriously bad, as we know from the biblical narrative ... but, hey, they all get a mention ... so it is for you and me - our names are written in the Lamb's book of life and they can never be blotted out or accidentally erased.

Mark the observation here ...

Again, we read in verse 10, that there were to be six names on one stone and six names on the other stone ... that underlines their equality in

his sight - it depicts his loyalty in representing them before the God of Israel - he didn't spend more time representing one than he did the other - nope ... all the same.

Ah, even today, our God has no favourites - no matter who or what we are, we're standing side by side on level ground ... shoulder to shoulder on Calvary ground, on resurrection ground. To put it simply, you're no better than me, and I'm no worse than you!

Paul picks up that theme in Ephesians 2 when he reminds us that we are quickened together, we are raised together, we are seated together, we are framed together, we are builded together, we are joined together, and we are gathered together ... yes, we're in this together!

That truth is also enshrined in his use of the word 'fellow' ... we are fellow heirs of one inheritance, we are fellow members of one body, we are fellow partakers of one calling, we are fellow citizens of one home, we are fellow labourers of one Master, we are fellow soldiers in one battle, and we are fellow prisoners with one hope ...

Mark the origin here ...

The word 'onyx' can be rendered 'sardonyx' as in Revelation 21:20 ... it was a stone with three basic colours in it - red, black, and white. That is highly suggestive for black reminds us of sin, red tells of redemption, and white speaks of purity. This was the foundation the twelve sons were resting upon - it was sure, solid, and stable.

It reminds me of a chorus I learned back in my days in Sunday School - some of you will know it: *My heart was black with sin, Until the Saviour came in, His precious blood I know, Has washed me white as snow.*

Ah, my friend, for you and me, this is a strong foundation for 'all other ground is sinking sand.' With one of old, we testify, 'On Christ the solid rock I stand ...' Yes, there are times when for one reason or another, we fall on the rock but, thank God, we'll never fall off the rock.

Mark the ornamentation here ...

This is fascinating for we read in verse 11 that both stones were to be 'set in settings of gold.' Another translation has it like this - 'mount the stones in gold filigree settings.' When that was done, they were then fastened 'on the shoulder pieces of the ephod' (verse 12).

No matter how we look at it, this highlights for us their security - they were perfectly safe upon his shoulders - there's no way they'd fall out of their clasp and then fall off - impossible! Firmly held, they were ... and so are we! Romans 8 is a powerful reminder of that solid gospel fact - no one and nothing can separate us from him. He is able to keep us ...

With the colours of the ephod in mind, we can tease this truth out a little more, for he is able to keep us as God in the gold, as Lord in the blue, as King in the purple, as Saviour in the scarlet, and as Jehovah Tsidkenu in the linen. In other words, all of God is keeping us - all that God is,

all that God has, all that God does, is working on our behalf.

Here's something worth noting ... in verse 11 we read: 'Engrave the names of the sons of Israel on the two stones the way a gem cutter engraves a seal.' Did you notice that - they weren't just put on there with a splash of paint, no ... they were graven, inscribed on there - etched on the stone for all of time ... hear these beautiful reassuring words from Isaiah 49:16, 'See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands ...'

As the old hymn, penned by William Hammond in the mid 1700s, says: *The Father has graven our name on his hands, Our record in heaven eternally stands.* Mr Spurgeon loved this hymn and often quoted it in his sermons from the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London - and here is the bottom line, we're on his hands, and that's a place where he will always see us - he will never forget us ...

Mark the objective here ...

What's the rationale behind it - why go to such lengths for the sake of a dozen names ...? Well, we have a clear answer at the end of verse 12, where we read: 'Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the Lord.'

At its simplest, it means that the people would know that they were upheld by the high priest before the God of the covenant. Their name was there and that meant everything!

You know, it's so wonderful for us to know that he loves us, he cares for us, he watches over us,

he provides for us ... and he upholds us ... all of this and so much more!

We're upon his shoulders - we recall what he did to Egypt and that Israel was carried on the wings of an eagle in Exodus 19:4 and brought safely to their God and Redeemer. Ah, surely that says it all - he will bear us up in times of stress and strain, in days of sorrow and sadness, in the hour of sickness ... yeah, he picks us up and he carries us on his shoulders! He represents us before our loving heavenly Father.

Another thought on this point - the onyx stones hid the seam that joined the two ends of the ephod together ... sometimes things happen to us on the journey of life that don't make a lot of sense, that we don't fully grasp or understand - in moments like that, we have the confidence that he will bear us up.

As the poet declares: *Not till the loom is silent, And the shutters cease to fly, Will God unroll the canvas, And explain the reason why, The dark threads are as needful, In the Weaver's skilful hand, As the threads of gold and silver, In the pattern he has planned.*

Mark the outcome here ...

The outcome is spelled out for us in a phrase that pops up with amazing frequency - verse 12b - 'as a memorial before the Lord.' That word is full of significance, isn't it - a memorial - what does that remind you of? Surely it's the breaking of bread where we commemorate his death for us on Calvary's cross - it's a memorial feast.

The Passover was a memorial speaking of their deliverance from bondage in the land of Egypt - they did it year after year so that they would not forget what God did on their behalf. The breastplate and shoulder stones were also seen as a memorial - reminding us that we are always before the Father on the heart and shoulder of his well beloved Son ... we do the Breaking of Bread as often as we can in obedience to his word - but we are constantly upheld before our Father in the heights of heaven.

Mark the opportunity here ...

Men of old requested, 'Sir, we would see Jesus.' Well, one look at these two onyx stones and you can't miss seeing him. It also leads us to think on other verses which underline the blessings that we have in the Lord Jesus.

I think of Isaiah 9:6, where we read: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace ...' Those are the **shoulders of sovereignty** for he is the King of kings.

What about the most familiar one in Luke 15 and the parable of the lost sheep? 99 are home and dry, they're ok, safe in the fold - but one is 'out on the mountains, wild and bear, far from the tender Shepherd's care ...' What does he do? He goes after it ... then we read in verses 5-6, 'And when [the shepherd] finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.' Those are the

shoulders of safety for he is the great Shepherd of the sheep.

Then we read in John 19:17 that Jesus 'carrying his own cross ... went out to the place of the skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha) and there they crucified him ...' Ah, those are the **shoulders of sympathy** for he is the Succourer of many.

And the last one is right here in Exodus 28 when the high priest bears them up in the presence of the holy One of Israel ... there before the golden altar they are faithfully represented by Aaron and his successors. For you and I, those are the **shoulders of strength** for Jesus is the great high priest.

Mark the omen here ...

And here's the last point. I love to meditate on the Mosaic blessing on Benjamin, the youngest of the twelve sons. We read it in Deuteronomy 33:12 and it's just so precious, so lovely, and so meaningful ... before we shine the spotlight on it, don't forget, eleven sons were born outside the land - Benjamin was the only one born in the land. His mother was Rachel, whose name means 'lamb of God.'

You'll remember that he was given two names - the first was Benoni, which means 'son of my sorrow' ... the second was Benjamin, which means 'son of my right hand.' What a delightful picture of our Lord Jesus - for that's what he was - the man of sorrows and then exalted to be the son seated at the Father's right hand.

So we read in Deuteronomy 33:12, 'Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders.'

Four take-home truths from this blessing - it speaks of the **chosen** of the Lord for we are 'beloved' i.e. we are loved by him ... we are a **companion** of the Lord for we rest safe and secure in him ... we are **covered** by the Lord for we are shielded and fully protected by him ... and we are **carried** by the Lord ...

Ah, what a **place** to be found - over his shoulders ... what a **position** to be in - safe and secure, we are upheld by him ... what a **person** to be near - none other than the Lord Jesus Christ ... and what a **preciousness** to feel - we are so close to him.

When I look at the onyx stones, I recall the words updated by Matt Merkel to another old song from a bygone era:

Those he saves are his delight, Christ will hold me fast; Precious in his holy sight, He will hold me fast. He'll not let my soul be lost, His promises shall last, Bought by him at such a cost, He will hold me fast.

Rejoice, dear friend, we are firmly held in the grip of his won't-let-go grace ... and ... we are upheld by him.

Next week, God willing, the torchlight will shine on another two stones - the Urim and Thummim.