

THE PRIESTHOOD

MEMORY VERSE: Hebrews 7:24, *Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.*

Aaron and the Priesthood

The work of the Priest and the Levites in the Bible is somewhat confusing because we rarely study it. Their responsibilities are summarized in the passages that you have studied this week. Our review should not only clear up their roles, but deepen our understanding of what Christ did for us as He became our great High Priest (Heb. 8-10).

The Rules And Regulations Guiding The Levites

The book of Leviticus does just that, it gives the instructions to the Levites who were in charge of the worship of the Israelite community. It was from the tribe of Levi that the priesthood was established in the OT. Aaron and his descendants were called to serve in what we call the "cultist of Israel", or the formal means of expressing religious reverence; religious ceremony and ritual.

REMEMBER - Every detail, every rite or ritual spelled out here in these little read books points to a greater and permanent fulfillment in the redemptive act of Christ.

So what's the overarching theme? The Book of Leviticus taught the people about the holiness of God as manifested in the rituals and behaviors of the Levites. The challenge is this, *"Be holy even as I am holy"* (Lev. 11:44).

The fundamental purpose of the priest is to be a minister of the Holy, to maintain the holiness of the nation. To raise the bar of moral purity where most we're just looking to get by i.e. let's do just enough, devote ourselves to a degree where God won't get too angry with us.

How would that attitude go over in your closest relationships? I'll do just enough to keep them from walking out the door. Reminds me of the guy who was asked why he never told his wife that he loved her. "She knows I love her. I don't need to express it. If I change my mind, she'll be the first to know." YIKES!

In Matt. 5:13-16 Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Billy Graham - "Preaching is not the only way we declare the gospel of Christ. Our lives also should be witnesses to others of THE REALITY OF CHRIST. Those who have affected me most profoundly in my life had not necessarily been great or eloquent preachers, but men and women of whose lives were marked by holiness and a devotion to become more like Jesus."

A Case Study in Leviticus (Lev. 10:1-3)

Young priests were experimenting with certain "innovations" in the place of worship. The "innovation" called here "strange fire" were not prescribed by God. These priests were Aaron's sons, but nevertheless were killed instantly.

A bit of liberty would allow us to get into the heart of Aaron. These are his two boys. When he discovers what has happened, he ran to Moses and asked him to inquiry of God as to why.

Moses responds in verse 3 Don't you remember Aaron what God had said, "those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored."

In this succinct response, we find the motif of the whole book of Leviticus - a demonstration of God's holiness and a manifestation of His glory.

Isa. 42:5 This is what God the LORD says-- he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: 6 "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, 7 to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. 8 "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.

Four Quick points:

1. Aaron was not bitter with God, for he understood the depth of God's holiness.
People ruin their lives by their own foolishness and then are angry at the LORD – Proverbs 19:3
2. All the laws, such as the dietary laws, had a local meaning (therapeutic or medicinal), but also pointed towards the holiness of God and His desire for His people to be different. To be set apart. To walk to the beat of a different drummer. You see this connection exemplified by the young men taken into captivity in Daniel chapter 1.

3. The fundamental difference between God and His people is that He is absolutely pure and holy. Since we are His people, we are to be holy as well.
4. From the first offering given by Abel to the worship offered in heaven in Revelation 19, God must be regarded as holy. As seen in the death of Aaron's two sons, we must seek to remove the corruption and the profane from our relationship with God. We are called to model a standard of holiness, to remind other followers of our call to mirror the character of God.

In a time of decadence in 17th century England, John and Charles Wesley began on the University campus of Oxford, what they called, "Holy Club". Today, we might simply refer to it as a "Christian Club." They came up with 26 questions they would ask one another. Here they are. I'll highlight just a few.

- Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am a better person than I really am?
- In other words, am I a hypocrite?
- Am I honest in all my words and acts, or do I exaggerate?
- Am I proud?
- Do I confidentially pass on to another what was told to me in confidence?
- Can I be trusted?
- Do I give in to dress, friends, work, or habits?
- Am I self-conscious, self-pitying or self-justifying?
- Did I give the Bible time to speak to me today?
- Am I enjoying prayer?
- Do I pray about the money I spend?
- Do I get to bed and get up in timely manner?
- Do I disobey God in anything?
- Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
- Am I defeated in any part of my life: jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy, or distrustful?
- How do I spend my spare time?
- Do I thank God that I am not as other people who don't have it all together?
- Is there anybody whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard?
- If so, what am I doing about it?
- Do I grumble or complain constantly?
- Is Christ real to me?
- Do I love God with all my heart?
- Is my faith simple?
- Do I love all the people You've placed in my life?
- When did I last speak to somebody else with the object of trying to win that person for Christ?
- Am I making contacts with other people and using them for the Master's glory?

Jesus, Our Great High Priest

In chapters 4 (verse 14) through 10 (verse 18) we encounter the Hebrew author's long, sustained argument about Jesus as the ultimate high priest, superior to the Aaronic priesthood and to Melchizedek. The author argues that Christ as high priest makes it possible for all people, not just priests, to '*approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy*' (4:16).

Let's look at the Aaronic priesthood first, and The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement and Christ's Priesthood (See Leviticus 16:1-10; 20-22).

- A. The high priest annually carried out the ceremony of atonement, or *Yom Kippur* described in Leviticus 16.
- B. Only the high priest entered the "*Holy of Holies*" and only once a year. After an elaborate cleansing ceremony ONLY ONE could enter the inner sanctum. The most sacred place of the temple where no other human being was allowed to set foot. No human being could draw near. There was a separation between the holy place and the holy of holies. Only the high priest and only one day per year.
- C. The blood of the lamb was placed on the mercy seat as an act of **propitiation** for the sins of the people.

Two dramatic elements took place on that day: Propitiation and Expiation. What's the difference?

- 1. The blood of the lamb that was slain was placed on the mercy seat for **Propitiation**. Propitiation is an act toward God in satisfying God's justice. Literally propitiation means to appease an offended party.
- A. Christ paid the penalty for our sins by pouring out His own blood and satisfying God's justice which demanded that life is poured out.

*Hebr. 10:1 The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming -- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. 2 If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. 3 But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, 4 **because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.***

- B. All the sacrifices in the Old Testament simply typified or foreshadowed what was to come. The Lamb (God/man) without blemish who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). In the death of Christ, the ultimate propitiation was made and God's wrath and justice was satisfied.

- C. Because God's wrath towards me is satisfied, I don't have to be punished. Why? Christ did not satisfy God's demand for justice on His own behalf, but rather on MY behalf. **2 Cor. 5:21**, "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ."
2. While propitiation is the vertical act toward God, **expiation** is the horizontal act in the removal of sin. Christ did BOTH. No high priest before Christ or since has had the ability to do that. Thus, Christ is BOTH just AND the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:25-26)
- A. **Expiation** occurred when the sins were transferred and carried away.
- B. In Old Testament times expiation occurred when the sins of the people were symbolically transferred to a scapegoat that was driven out of the camp. See Lev. 16:10.

So, in propitiation, Jesus saves us from the penalty of sin by satisfying the justice of God. In the expiation, he saves us from the power of sin by driving that power from our lives.

Who Was Melchizedek?

The Hebrew writer opens chapter seven with a brief note of the one incident recorded in the life of Melchizedek, namely his meeting with Abraham as the patriarch returned from the defeat of the five kings (Gen 14:18-20; Melchizedek is mentioned again only in Ps 110:4). He draws attention to what is known of this man. He sees several reasons for regarding Melchizedek as superior to Abraham:

- He took tithes from Abraham;
- He blessed him;
- He was "without beginning of days or end of life" (v. 3);
- He "is declared to be living" (v. 8, in contrast to the Aaronic priests who die); and
- Levi, the ancestor of the Levitical priests, paid him tithes (being included in Abraham).

Hebrews presents Christ as our King AND Great High Priest.

1. The New Testament bends over backwards to demonstrate that Jesus is from the tribe of Judah. The kingly Davidic line.
2. The Hebrew shows how Christ can also be our High Priest even though Jesus is not of the tribe of Levi (6:20). Aaron was a Levite. Moses was a Levite. If you were going to be a priest. YOU HAD TO BE FROM THE TRIBE OF LEVI. This was known as the Aaronic priesthood. However, what the writer is

attempting to communicate to his readers is that BEFORE Jacob, Levi, Aaron, Moses were born and thus the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood, there was a greater priest known as Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is proven to be a greater priest than Levi, making Christ's priesthood superior to Levi's priesthood. Since Melchizedek blesses Abraham, Melchizedek is greater because he does the blessing and receives tithes from Abraham. Think about this for a moment. Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation pays tribute to Melchizedek. In other words, we have an individual who is GREATER than Abraham. John 8:58, *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"* Who is greater Abraham or his great grandson Levi? Abraham is greater than Levi! And Christ is greater than Abraham.

Chapter 7 is rounded off with a glowing description of Christ as our High Priest, better qualified than the Levitical priests, and one who offered a better sacrifice than they did.

He (Jesus) is the kind of high priest we need because he is holy and blameless, unstained by sin. He has been set apart from sinners and has been given the highest place of honor in heaven. Unlike those other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices every day. They did this for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he offered himself as the sacrifice for the people's sins. The law appointed high priests who were limited by human weakness. But after the law was given, God appointed his Son with an oath, and his Son has been made the perfect High Priest forever – Hebrews 7:26-28.

Three Closing Points

1. The Hebrew writer describes Jesus (7:26) as *"holy, blameless, pure, set apart..."* These very same characteristics are what we as followers of Christ are to emulate. Think about those words, is there something unholy that we are allowing to permeate our lives? In the words of the Psalmist, (Psa. 139:23-24), *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*
2. Christ's atonement gives us access to God. The *"Holy of Holies"* is open to believers. The eternal place of rest – heaven itself. There was such reverence and awe attributed to the earthly holy of holies, how greater the heavenly one which the writer is saying is now open and **accessible**. Genesis 3:23-24, *"So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life."* The angel posted the sign: NO ACCESS! When Jesus made atonement, the veil was torn from top to bottom

(Matt. 27:51). The sign was torn down. Those who are *in Christ* can now come in the presence of God. No fear. No rejection. No condemnation (Rom. 8:31-35) *If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all --how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died --more than that, who was raised to life --is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?)*

3. We are able to approach God with **boldness** (to a Jew, this is lunacy) without any hint of arrogance as our access has NOTHING to do with us and EVERYTHING to do with Him.

Let me close with this...Author and speaker Frank Viola in his work *From Eternity To Here: Rediscovering The Ageless Purpose Of God* wrote,

"Our great high priest is looking for people who will take their stand in Christ. He's after a people who will dare to believe that they are part of Christ's beloved bride. A people who will defy what they see through their natural eyes and instead look through his eyes. He's looking for a people who see themselves as he sees them, through the prism of divine righteousness, part of the new creation wherein the fall has been eliminated. This is the necessary beginning to fulfilling God's grand mission. To take any other view is to serve God out of guilt, religious duty, or ambition rather than out of love."

In our journey with Christ, God not only changes what we do but He also changes what we want to do.

May our lives be open, eager, and moldable as our great high priest continues the transformation in our lives.