



## Jesus the Priest

### Lesson 8

The idea of the priest is one that is both familiar and strange to modern day believers, especially Baptist Americans. We use the language of priest and sacrifice often, but likely we've never actually seen an animal be sacrificed by an actual priest! But priests are critical to the Bible's story line and to the message of the gospel. Thanks to Christ's work, we have no need for priests because Christ is our high priest and we ourselves are priests. But thinking about priests, and specifically about the priesthood of Christ, is an important practice for New Testament believers.

In the last two lessons, we have been working through the different roles of Jesus and the different work that is associated with each of those roles. As Christian theologian Millard Erickson has noted: kings rule, prophets reveal, and priests reconcile. We have seen that Jesus was a prophet, one who perfectly revealed God's message. We have seen that Jesus was a king, one who will one day perfectly rule over God's earth. Today we will see that Jesus is a priest, one who intercedes on man's behalf and reconciles man and God.

In our lesson, we will seek to answer three questions: "What was a priest in the Old Testament like?" We will then ask the further question, "How can we say that Jesus is a priest?" Finally, we will ask "In what ways does Jesus fulfill the function of a priest?" In all of this, we will be seeking to grow in our love for Christ, our great high priest, and to understand better his work on our behalf.

***How might seeing a priest offer sacrifices regularly change the way we think about life?***

#### **I. The Old Testament Priesthood (Hebrews 5:1-4)**

The concept of a priest is one that we find all the way back to the Old Testament. As we have done with our previous lessons, we will start by asking what the Old Testament had to say about the given role, and then show how the New Testament fulfills those functions.

***Read the passage and then ask the group what the different elements of the high priesthood we see in this passage.***

**A. The qualifications for the Old Testament priesthood (Hebrews 5:4).**

As we study the Old Testament carefully, we realize that not just anyone could be a priest. You couldn't pick up an application form and mail one to Moses. There were certain qualifications that had to be met and certain functions that a priest was expected to fulfill.

**1. The high priest needed to be sympathetic (Hebrews 5:2).**

While this qualification is not explicitly stated in the Old Testament, it's implied in the nature of their role. In order to help out the people, it was important for the priests to understand the struggles and the weaknesses of the people they ministered to.

*Why is it that a sympathetic priest is important?*

**2. The high priest needed to be holy (Hebrews 5:3).**

The priests were held to a higher standard of holiness than the common person. Although some of this included ritual requirements which didn't necessarily involve sin, it was also expected that a priest would deal with his personal sins before entering into God's presence on behalf of someone else. Even though not always sinful, the strict purity laws taught that one must be very careful when coming into the presence of God.

**3. The high priest needed to be called (Hebrews 5:4).**

There was nowhere you could go to sign up to be the high priest, or any priest for that matter. God specifically called the priests to be priests, and so without a divine calling there was no priest. In the Old Testament, this calling was limited to Aaron and his descendants.

**B. The function of the Old Testament priesthood (5:1).**

Priests were essentially butchers. Day in and day out they killed animals and burned them on altars. But why did they do this? What did they think they were accomplishing?

**1. The high priest interceded on behalf of the people (Hebrews 5:1).**

The role of the priest is to stand between the people and the deity. The priest brings people to God; it is his job to help those who have wronged God to make up what they have done so that they can be back in fellowship with him.

**2. The high priest sacrificed for the sins of the people (Hebrews 5:1).**

The main way in which the priests accomplished this was by presenting sacrifices. The main way that a priest goes about doing this is by offering sacrifices.

*Why do you think God originally set up a priesthood in the first place? Why weren't people allowed to come to him directly from the start?*

## **II. The Melchizedekian Priesthood (Psalm 110:4; cf Hebrews 5:10; 7:1-28).**

One of the questions that should naturally arise when thinking about the priesthood is how it is that Jesus can even be a high priest, since he is not from the tribe of Levi. That would seem to be pretty cut and dry – he doesn't have the right lineage, so he couldn't be called, so he can't be a priest, right? The author of Hebrews foresees this objection and has a ready answer – Jesus wasn't a Levitical priest. He was a Melchizedekian priest!

This reasoning is quite technical. In fact, after announcing his topic, the author of Hebrews takes over a chapter (5:11-6:20) to warn his audience to stick with him as he wades through some deeper issues in theology. We won't do a careful, detailed study of all these verses, but we will note a couple of important highlights.

### **A. The need for a new priesthood (Psalm 110:4, cf Hebrews 7:11).**

Psalm 110 is a fascinating and hugely important Psalm (in fact, it's one of the most quoted chapters of the Old Testament). In Psalm 110 the author extols the Messianic heir as a ruler-priest. He rules over all his enemies which the Lord subdues for him, and then we find in an interesting twist that he declared to be a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

The author of Hebrews picks up on this and argues that if there was a prediction of a new priesthood is coming, then there must have been something wrong with the previous priesthood. Today we might say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." What exactly was wrong will be developed later, but the main point here is that the author of Hebrews reads Psalm 110 and think, "Okay, this verse should have been seen as evidence that the Levitical priests would one day be replaced."

### **B. The superiority of this new priesthood (Hebrews 7:4-10, 15-24).**

But the author of Hebrews doesn't stop there. He goes beyond saying that a replacement was necessary to say that what replaced it was far better. Jesus was better for at least three reasons: 1) Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, since Abraham paid tithes to Abraham and blessed him.<sup>1</sup> Since Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, his priesthood would be greater than any priesthood that came from Abraham's descendants. 2) The priests of the Old Testament did not receive a direct oath from God when they began their priesthood. Jesus, however, as the ultimate referent of Psalm 110 did receive an oath from God. 3) Jesus's priesthood is better because Jesus never dies, meaning that his priesthood never comes to an end.

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<sup>1</sup> The logic here is that blessing is more than a well-wish, but is an almost prophetic declaration of God's good will for a person. Isaac blessed Jacob, Jacob blessed his sons, etc. In this context, it would have been weird for the son to bless the father. Likewise, for Melchizedek to bless Abraham must mean that Melchizedek is greater than even Abraham, the great patriarch.

While deep and perhaps even challenging to study this issue out, the main points is pretty obvious. The author of Hebrews recognizes that Jesus is the priest that Psalm 110 was talking about, and as such sees him as an important improvement on the Old Testament priesthood. Let's look at some specific ways how in our final section.

### **III. Jesus's Priesthood**

As he looks at the life of Christ, the author of Hebrews notes several important parallels between the ministry of Jesus and that of the priests. He not only argues that Jesus can be a high priest because he is part of a different priesthood, he argues it is a better priesthood. Let's look at the similarities and differences between Christ's priesthood and the priesthood of the Old Testament.

#### **A. Jesus meets the qualifications for being a high priest.**

In our first section we saw three qualifications for being a priest. In this section, we will see how the author of Hebrews points out that Jesus fulfilled all of them.

##### **1. Jesus is sympathetic (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:14-16).**

Twice the author of Hebrews emphasizes the fact that Jesus can help us because he knows what we've been through. Jesus took on humanity, and that means he knows firsthand what it means to be a human and to be faced with the daunting challenge of following God while living on a sin-cursed planet. He knew hunger, cold, loneliness, sorrow, frustration, and all the problems that we do. He is qualified to go to God on our behalf because he is truly a sympathetic high priest.

***In what ways was Jesus touched with the feeling of our weakness (infirmity)? How does it help knowing this about Christ?***

##### **2. Jesus is completely holy (Hebrews 7:26-28).**

Jesus is better than the previous priests, because unlike them he has no need to offer sacrifices for his sin. Whereas previous priests needed to make sure they stayed holy, in part by offering sacrifices for their sins, Jesus never needed to offer a sacrifice for his own sins. Jesus is uniquely qualified to be our high priest, to serve as our go-between between the Father and us, because he is perfectly holy in a way no other priest ever has been.

***Why does it matter that Jesus is completely sinless? How does this teaching coincide with what the fact that Jesus is sympathetic?***

**3. Jesus is called by God (Hebrews 5:5-6, 10).**

As we saw earlier, the author of Hebrews sees Jesus, the fulfillment of Psalm 110, as being called by God and even having that calling being confirmed with an oath (7:21). Jesus has a unique calling that qualifies him to be our high priest.

**B. Jesus performs the functions of a high priest.**

Finally, we saw the function of a high priest was to intercede on behalf of the people, normally by bringing a sacrifice. In Hebrews, we similarly see Jesus doing both of these things.

**1. Jesus intercedes on our behalf (Hebrews 4:14-16).**

This passage is probably one of the most loved in all of Scripture, and for good reason. We are told that Christ is standing before the Father making intercession for us. This fact allows us the right to come boldly before God's thrones with the deep needs that we have and find God's help.

*What two things do we receive at the throne? How are they similar and how are they different?*

*What difference does it make knowing that Jesus intercedes for us in our sin and sorrow?*

**2. Jesus sacrifices on our behalf (Hebrews 10:1-18).**

*In what ways does this passage describe Christ's sacrifice as greater than sacrifices in the Old Testament?*

In this section, Christ is shown to be a greater high priest because he gives a greater sacrifice – his own life. Previous sacrifices were insufficient, because they didn't truly deal with the sin problem, nor could they. Because of this, countless sacrifices were required year after year, and even still the root problem of sin remained unaddressed. In contrast, the sacrifice of Christ was given once for all, and addressed our sin problem once and for all. Too often, we take for granted the sacrifice of Christ, and the fact that he has ended the need for Old Testament sacrifices.

We may not have opportunity to think much about priests in America today, but we should think much about the priestly work of Christ as we study our Bibles. The book of Hebrews lifts up Jesus Christ as the great priest, the one who gave himself for us and who not only offered the greatest sacrifice, but was that great sacrifice. In our battles with sin and as we wrestle with unbelief while walking through this confusing and sometimes broken life, we can find comfort as we look to Scripture and are reminded that Jesus is our great high priest.