

Jesus the Priest, Part 1

Our study of priests in the Old Testament will focus primarily on the Mosaic Priesthood. While we see other priests in the Old Testament, God goes to great lengths to define the role and the lifestyle of the priests under the Old Law. It is through this lens that we can gain a greater understanding of Jesus as our High Priest.

The Essence of the Priesthood

The priesthood under the Law of Moses consisted of the tribe of Levi. This tribe was chosen particularly for the task. In Numbers 3:12-13 we see that God claims the Levites for His own work:

“Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD.”

This passage shows us that the Levites, who offer sacrifices, are also being offered as a sacrifice themselves. God references Exodus 12 where God sent a plague over the land of Egypt and the firstborn sons were to be killed. However God spared the firstborn of the Israelites who put the blood on their doorpost. Yet God still had a right to their lives. Rather than use the firstborn from every family of every tribe to fulfill the role of the priests, God uses the tribe of Levi and them alone as His people. They take the place of the firstborns from all of the other tribes.

Understanding they are a sacrifice themselves may help us better understand the purity that was required. We understand that God desires a certain standard of holiness from His priests. This is not unlike the sacrifices themselves. In Leviticus 4 we see the law for sin offerings. The Lord emphasizes that the sacrifice is to be “without blemish”. God expects the best in His sacrifices. He also expected the best from the priests themselves. Leviticus 21 lays out the expectations for a priest. They were expected to keep themselves clean, to not have bald patches or to shave the edges off of their beard. They needed to marry a pure woman themselves. If Levites had blemishes or physical defects, they were not allowed to serve God.

This focus on outward cleanliness was given by God to emphasize what was needed for inward holiness. God’s point was to stress that He was holy, and that He needed to be approached as holy by holy people. The priesthood then was not just about the jobs they performed. They needed to live and act in a certain way to be able to properly perform them. Without the requisite holiness their sacrifices become meaningless. In Jeremiah 5:30-31, the prophet proclaims that something terrible has happened, the priests no longer follow God. They

may have still been offering sacrifices and wearing the name priest, but they had long since lost what it truly meant to be a priest. God lets them know that they will be judged for that.

The Roles of the Priesthood

Representative of the People to God

One of the major roles the priest played is a representative of the people to God. While all priests played this role to some degree, it was the High Priest who fulfilled it to the greatest extent. This can be seen in Leviticus 16 as God establishes the Day of Atonement.

This assembly was set up by God for the Israelites, and he expected them to do it once a year. The purpose was to provide atonement for all of the sins of the people. He was the representative of the people. He had to cleanse himself and make atonement for his own sin. After doing so, he then could move forward and come before God and make a sacrifice on behalf of the people. In doing so he became their representative. He was able to appeal to God for the forgiveness of their sins. God would listen to his plea, and accept his sacrifice and atonement would be made for all the people.

This was the only time of the year that the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and he was the only who was allowed to do so. This distinction is important. While there was a sacrificial system and the people of Israel were able to come and offer sacrifices at the temple, there came a point where they could come no further. Since the temple was known as the dwelling place of God (shown quite clearly by His presence descending once the temple was completed) restrictions on who could enter equate to a restriction on who was allowed in the Lord's presence. Since the people could not go before God directly, they needed someone to make peace with God on their behalf.

As the Day of Atonement and the other sacrifices signify, the priests played a part in requesting peace from God. God gave the people a set of laws and ordinances that were meant to be followed. As He laid out this law, He also let them know there were dire consequences if they did not obey. There were blessings if they obeyed God, but the Israelites had seen the power of God against the Egyptians. If they rebelled as well, then God would bring judgment upon them as well.

It was up to the priests to stay the judgment of God. They would offer the sacrifices for the people to receive forgiveness. The people had no way to make atonement for themselves. It was only through the intercession of the priests on their behalf that they could be forgiven and avoid the judgment and wrath of God.

Representative of God to the People

Priests not only served as the representative of the people. They also acted as God's representative to the people. We can see that God designed this from the very beginning of the priesthood, as He sets up the standards for both the tabernacle and the High Priest in the book of Exodus.

As God is setting up the instructions for building the tabernacle, he also gives instructions for what the priests are to wear in their priestly service. The similarities are noticeable:

- Both are to use pure gold for accents and major pieces (Exodus 25:18,24; 26:29; 28:11,13-14)
- Both use gold rings for connectors (Exodus 25:26; 26:29; 28:23)
- Both use gold, blue, purple and scarlet yarns (26:1,31; 28:5, 15)

These common elements were meant to be noticed by the people. It showed the High Priest's connection to God. The people needed to send a message of repentance to God. However God also needed to transmit a message of forgiveness and acceptance in response. The priest was the messenger on behalf of God. His outfit reminded them that He alone had the right to go before the Mercy Seat and make a request of God. He alone could bring back the reply.

We can see another aspect of this in Leviticus 6:25-30. When a sin offering is brought before a priest, the priest is able to eat it as a meal. This shows an acceptance of such a sacrifice. The priest eating of the sacrifice signifies a sense of fellowship between the priest and the one making the sin offering. By accepting the sacrifice and partaking in it, the priest confirms the sacrifice is accepted by the priest. More importantly, it is also accepted by God. This is what made the sons of Eli so contemptible (1 Samuel 2:13-17). They abused the power inherent in the priesthood. They changed the terms of God's acceptance to something that matched their own desires. As God's representatives they had no right to do so. They could only offer the acceptance of a sacrifice on God's terms. They went beyond that and brought judgment upon themselves.

While Eli's sons used the power to benefit themselves by taking more than God asked for, other priests would profane the office by accepting sacrifices that were less than God desired. Malachi 1:6-8 brings blame specifically to the priests. While it was wrong for the people to offer such sacrifices (God indeed holds them accountable), we are able to see in this passage that God would have rather the priests shut the door than continue to offer such sacrifices for the people. As His representative, they should reject these offerings. They should have told them that God would accept no other sacrifice. If they were not going to do it correctly, then they should not bother doing it at all. The priests failed at being God's representatives. They refused to tell the people what God desired so that the people could be forgiven.

Conclusion:

In this lesson we have seen the importance of the role of priest in the Old Testament. We have seen that God requires holiness from a priest. We also see that they are able to be a representative for both God and man. They act as an intermediary between both sides, and it is important for both sides that they take their role seriously and do it well. Having established these roles, we can now look forward to see how Jesus was fulfill the role as a priest

Questions:

1. Which type of priests are we focusing on with this study?
2. Name some of the priests you are familiar with in the Old Testament.
3. How could the priests be considered a sacrifice themselves?
4. What were some of the laws of cleanliness that God expected the priests to follow?
5. Why did God have so many laws about cleanliness for the priests?
6. How did the High Priest represent people on the Day of Atonement?
7. What did the Priest accomplish on the Day of Atonement?
8. What are some of the similarities between the priests' wardrobe and the temple?
9. How did the priests represent God to the people?
10. Give an example of a priest misrepresenting God to the people.