

# We Believe in Jesus

LESSON  
FOUR

## THE PRIEST



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# We Believe in Jesus

## Lesson Four

### The Priest

#### INTRODUCTION

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Most of us can barely imagine being invited to meet someone very famous and powerful. But we all know how we might react. We'd say to ourselves, "Will someone introduce me? What should I wear? What should I do? What should I say? Who can show me how to act when I'm there?"

Imagine that you were invited into the glorious throne room of God. The one who created all things. You might have a similar reaction, actually one vastly stronger. "Is there anyone to introduce me to God? What should I do? What should I say? Who can show me how to act in God's presence?"

Happily, there is someone who can prepare us to meet with God, who can introduce us to him, and can cause God to look favorably on us so that we don't need to fear his judgment. And of course, this person is Jesus Christ, and he is our Great High Priest.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *We Believe in Jesus*, and we have entitled it "The Priest." In this lesson, we'll explore the ways that Jesus fulfills the biblical office of priest, mediating the covenant between God and his people.

As we've seen in prior lessons, in the Old Testament God instituted three offices through which he administered his kingdom: the offices of prophet, priest and king. And in the final stage of God's kingdom, which we commonly call the New Testament age, all three of these offices find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus.

For this reason, studying the importance and function of these offices throughout history can help us understand Jesus' present administration of God's kingdom, as well as the blessings and obligations of his faithful followers. In this lesson, we'll focus on Jesus' office of priest. We'll define a priest as:

**A person who mediates between God and his people so that God will receive them into his special holy presence to grant them his blessing.**

We all know that God is invisibly present everywhere all the time. But at certain times and places, he also manifests himself in special, visible ways. For example, he does this in the radiant splendor of his heavenly throne room. And he sometimes does this on earth, too. And whenever creatures come near this kind of manifestation of God, we have to be properly prepared, represented and led, so that we can receive God's approval and blessings. In the Bible, this kind of preparation, representation and leading was the job of the priests.

Like our lesson on Jesus' office of prophet, this lesson on Jesus' office of priest will cover three main topics. First, we'll examine the Old Testament background to the priestly office. Second, we'll explore the fulfillment of this office in the person and work

of Jesus. And third, we'll consider the modern application of Jesus' priestly work. Let's look first at the Old Testament background to Jesus' priestly office.

## OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

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When most Christians think about priesthood in the Old Testament, their minds go immediately to Aaron and his descendants, who were ordained as priests during the days of Moses, as we read in Leviticus 8–9.

But it's important to recognize that even before the days of Moses, there were already priests who served God. In a very broad sense, even before the fall into sin God ordained Adam, the father of the human race to be his priest. And following Adam, all of humanity was originally called to be God's priests in this general sense.

In a more technical sense, we find men like Melchizedek in Abraham's day, who is mentioned in Genesis 14. He was both the king and priest of Salem. Job 1 indicates that Job himself acted as a priest for his family. And according to Exodus 3, Moses' own father-in-law Jethro was God's priest in Midian.

Eventually, God established an official and exclusive priesthood in which Aaron and his descendants replaced all other forms of priesthood. But all these different types of men were true priests of the Lord. And each is part of the Old Testament background of Jesus' priesthood.

We'll explore the Old Testament background of the priestly office in three ways. First, we'll look at the qualifications of priests. Second, we'll consider their function. And third, we'll explore the expectations the Old Testament created for the future of the priestly ministry. Let's look first at the qualifications that priests had to meet in the Old Testament.

### QUALIFICATIONS

Ancient priests had to meet a variety of qualifications, but we'll mention just two that Scripture emphasizes. First, we'll see that priests were appointed by God. And second, we'll highlight their obligation to be loyal to God. Let's begin with the fact that priests were appointed by God to serve him in their office.

#### Appointed by God

In the Old Testament, only God could appoint a priest. Priests were never self-appointed. They couldn't be voted into office. They couldn't be appointed by kings or other rulers. And even the priests themselves couldn't select additional people to serve in their ranks. Listen to Exodus 28:1, where God gave this command to Moses:

**Have Aaron your brother brought to you ... along with his sons ... so they may serve me as priests (Exodus 28:1).**

The detailed instructions that follow in Exodus 28 show that God's appointment was an indispensable part of Aaron's ordination as high priest. And Numbers 18:22-23 goes so far as to say that if any Israelite from another tribe presumed to do the work of a priest, that person would die. Hebrews 5:1, 4 confirms this idea with these words:

**Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God... No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was (Hebrews 5:1, 4).**

This same principle also applied not just to the high priest, but to all priests in the Old Testament.

Besides being appointed by God, priests also had to be loyal to God in order to qualify for their office.

## **Loyal to God**

Because priests often served near the special presence of God in the tabernacle and the temple, they had to demonstrate special loyalty to God by worshiping and serving him alone, and by carefully carrying out their duties. They also had to do these things in order to ensure that God's people were loyal to God, so that they would be received into his holy presence.

**We learn from the Old Testament priests that there were very particular rules they had to follow, and there was a very particular way they had to even offer the fire of the sacrifice, and there was a certain way they had to investigate the animals brought to sacrifice to make sure that they were perfect, that they indeed were unblemished. God required that. And the priest had certain garments that he had to wear, and he had certain washings that he needed to go through, and the book of Hebrews emphasizes that the details of all of this, including the tabernacle and all the things in the tabernacle, were given because they represent what he called the "heavenly tabernacle," where — which is the very presence of God. The priests, therefore, are representing the Lord Jesus Christ. The priests are representing the kind of holiness and the kind of satisfaction that must be given to God if we are to be forgiven. And so, everything in the priestly arrangements, in the priestly laws, is given to show us the perfection of who Christ is, and that he actually would bear the sins of his people. The garments that they wore and the names of the tribes written on them and the perfection of the sacrifices, all of these things are to show us how serious God takes this, how holy he is, and that**

**when you come to the end of it there is really going to be only one way in which salvation can come. If there's any compromise of that one way, then we're done for and there is no satisfaction. So, the priestly rules are very important to establish within our minds the seriousness of God's holiness and righteousness and the singularity of the sacrifice of Christ.**

— Dr. Thomas Nettles

One of the most dramatic examples of the need for priests to be holy appears in Leviticus 10:1-2. There, God killed the priests Nadab and Abihu because of their unholy offering. And in 1 Samuel 4, the priests Hophni and Phineas died because of their disregard for the Lord.

In addition to these examples, Scriptures like Psalm 132:9 and Lamentations 4:11-13 make it clear that the priests themselves had to be faithful to God if they were to have any hope of preparing and leading his people into his special presence in order to receive his blessings. Otherwise, drawing near to God would result in severe judgment.

Having seen the qualifications for priests in the Old Testament, let's look at their function.

## FUNCTION

We'll consider three aspects of the function of priests. First, we'll look at the leadership they provided. Second, we'll explore the ceremonies they performed. And third, we'll consider their intercession on behalf of others. Let's begin with the leadership priests provided.

### Leadership

Old Testament priests provided leadership for God's people in various ways. But for our purposes we'll summarize these under three headings. First, worship was one of the more prominent areas in which priests provided leadership.

Worship was an important part of preparing and leading God's people into his special holy presence. In Israel, priests and Levites presided over all the national worship events, such as the annual feasts of Israel. They also conducted worship in the tabernacle and temple on a daily basis, as well as special services on the weekly Sabbath. And they led participants in praise and singing. We find these kinds of details in places like 1 Chronicles 15; 2 Chronicles 7, 8, 29 and 30; and Nehemiah 12.

Second, priests provided special guidance in the form of civil and ritual judgments. They did this primarily by applying God's law to the circumstances they faced. This fact is mentioned in many places, such as Exodus 28:29-30, Numbers 21:27, Deuteronomy 21:5 and Ezekiel 44:24.

For example, listen to the way Moses described the civil judgments priests could render in Deuteronomy 17:8-9:

**If cases come before your courts that are too difficult for you to judge — whether bloodshed, lawsuits or assaults ... Go to the priests, who are Levites, and to the judge who is in office at that time. Inquire of them and they will give you the verdict (Deuteronomy 17:8-9).**

As this passage indicates, legal matters were normally solved in local courts. But in particularly difficult cases, the people could go to priests or special judges who would render judgments. In fact, in Exodus 18 Jethro the Midianite priest told Moses himself how to organize the courts and judges of Israel. Jethro's priesthood had made him an authority in such matters.

Priestly decisions and guidance also included investigating, interpreting and judging matters related to health and holiness. Priests inspected the presence of mildew in houses, diagnosed diseases, and declared individuals or objects clean or unclean according to God's laws. These kinds of priestly duties are listed in passages like Leviticus 11–15.

These were priestly matters because personal and public health problems entered the world as part of God's curse against Adam's sin, in which Adam was excluded from the special presence of God in the Garden of Eden. The universal curse of death was instituted in Genesis 3:19. And this general judgment incorporated other judgments related to health, as we see in passages like Leviticus 26:16 and Deuteronomy 28:21-28. For this reason, health issues played an important role in preparing the Israelites for approaching God for his blessings.

A third way priests demonstrated leadership was by teaching God's word to the people, as we read in 2 Chronicles 35:3, Nehemiah 8 and Malachi 2.

As just one example, listen to the Lord's words in Malachi 2:7:

**For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction — because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty (Malachi 2:7).**

False teaching was a result of sin in the world, and violations of God's word made people unfit to enter his special presence. So, the priests were given the job of teaching God's word in order to prepare and lead his people into his special holy presence in a way that would result in his blessing.

Having considered the leadership priests provided, let's look next at the ceremonies they conducted for their people.

## **Ceremonies**

**In the lives of Old Testament believers, the various festivals, the Sabbath observances, sacrificial offerings that were made, they played**



a very important role. First of all, they were to remind Israel that its life as the people of God was a gift to them. For instance, the Passover was meant to remind them that they were once slaves in Egypt, and God and God alone has set them free. But not just to remind them that they were set free, because they set free from Egypt to be taken to Sinai where God would establish his covenant with them. So the festival life of Israel was meant to be a reminder to them that God and God alone has called them to be his people, to remember the mighty works of God to save them. The Sabbaths were meant to remind them of two things, that the world is Yahweh's and that they didn't create themselves, and they didn't free themselves from slavery. In Exodus, Moses says, "Keep the Sabbath, for on the Sabbath day God rests." In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses says keep the Sabbath because not only did God rest on the Sabbath day, but remember that you were once slaves in Egypt. So, all of these festivals were meant to remind them of what God has done to redeem them and to remind them that they are alone the people of God because of God's gracious goodness toward them, and out of those practices have their lives shaped, their self-understanding shaped, so that they would begin and continue to respond faithfully to God in lives of obedience, trust, love and service.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

In the days of Moses, and later in David's day, priests conducted a wide variety of ceremonies that were designed to prepare God's people to enter his special presence. These ceremonies involved holy times, events and objects, as we see in places like Leviticus 1–7 and 23; Numbers 18–19; 1 Chronicles 23; and 2 Chronicles 8.

Often, these ceremonies centered around holy locations — places where God's special presence would appear and his people would worship him. For example, it was the priests' responsibility to make sure that the tabernacle and temple areas were as beautiful and perfect as possible, so that it would be appropriate for God to reside there in his special visible glory. We read about this in passages like Leviticus 24:1-9; Numbers 3–4; and 1 Chronicles 24:25-32.

But perhaps the most well-known ceremonial feature of priestly service was the presentation of offerings. Offerings ranged from expressions of thanksgiving, to experiences of fellowship, to atonement for sin. Some were presented at regularly appointed intervals, such as the daily morning and evening sacrifices, and the annual Day of Atonement. Others were presented when special conditions were met, like being convicted of sin. And other offerings were brought according to the volition of the worshiper, such as freewill offerings. A wide range of prescribed offerings is listed in places like Leviticus 1–7 and 16.

Of all the ceremonial functions of priests, the one that was most prominent in Jesus' own ministry was the presentation of offerings — especially offerings of atonement. So we'll focus most of our attention on those.

Today we often speak of sacrifice as giving up something that is valuable, to gain us something that is even more valuable. What makes a gift a sacrifice is that the giving

costs us something that we value. In the Old Testament, people did not offer things to God because he needed them. Offerings allowed God's people to give something they valued to gain what was much more valuable — such as the forgiveness of sins.

Offerings allowed believers to worship God, express their submissiveness to him, and even convey their thankfulness to him for his provision. Of course, offerings were always supposed to be an expression of faith, done with proper motives. God even rejected sacrifices that were not offered with a sincere heart. The efficacy of offerings was always dependent upon the sincerity of the one offering the sacrifice to God.

Atoning offerings were an important part of priestly ministry even before the extensive ritual laws given through Moses. For instance, in Job 1, Job sacrificed animals on behalf of his children in case they had carelessly sinned during their celebrations together. In fact, atoning offerings are as old as humanity's fall into sin. When Adam and Eve first sinned, God instituted offerings of atonement through which he forgave sins and reconciled himself to his people. This type of offering is described in places like Leviticus 4–6, and Numbers 15:25-28.

The general idea behind atonement is fairly straightforward: Because of our sin, all human beings deserve to be punished. So, in order to avoid this just punishment, worshipers offer sacrifices that receive God's punishment on their behalf. Theologians often refer to this as “substitutionary atonement” because the offering substitutes for the worshiper in the ceremony of atonement.

In all cases throughout the Old Testament, atoning offerings were symbolic. God applied forgiveness to his people by means of atoning offerings, but not on the basis of the value or merit of the offering itself. Rather, Old Testament offerings were effective only because they pointed forward to the substance and merit of the sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament.

The New Testament explains that God's people were never permanently forgiven of sin on the basis of the Old Testament offerings themselves. Sin offerings only delayed God's judgment, and needed to be renewed over and over. Christ's death on the cross was the only sacrifice that God ever accepted as full, permanent payment for sins. God provided the Old Testament sacrificial system as a tool through which he graciously applied the merits of Christ's death to Old Testament believers.

When atoning offerings were performed on behalf of faithful believers, they produced at least two important results, both of which relied on the future sacrifice of Christ for their effectiveness. The first result we'll mention is expiation.

Expiation refers to the effect of the offering on the worshiper. It's the removal of the guilt of sin from worshippers. This protects them from the wrath that God would otherwise pour out on them. Through expiation, the punishment for the worshippers' sin is laid on the substitute, so that they are protected from the Lord's judgment.

Expiation is mentioned in places where sin is spoken of as being “covered” or “hidden,” such as Job 14:17, and Psalm 32:1, 5. It's also apparent in passages that speak of sin or guilt being “removed,” such as Leviticus 10:17, Psalm 25:18, and Isaiah 6:7; and we see it in passages that speak of sin being “transferred” to a substitute, such as Isaiah 53:6.

A second result atoning offerings produced for believers was propitiation. Propitiation refers to the effect the offering has on God. Propitiation is the satisfaction of God's justice and wrath against sin. Propitiation indicates that God's wrath has found a

place of expression and has been satisfied. Because of it, God is able to express kindness and love toward the worshipper without bypassing his justice.

Propitiation is indicated by passages that speak of God's anger being satisfied or turned aside, such as Numbers 25:11-13 and Deuteronomy 13:16-17.

**The Old Testament sacrificial system is a great demonstration of a whole number of truths about God, but especially his mercy. We think of it often in terms of the provision of the animals as substitutes for the people in order to satisfy God's displeasure, his condemnation, his wrath. But we have to also remember that the entire motivation of this is driven by his love, his mercy — when we think of mercy, his pity towards us — tied to even his grace where we have that which we do not deserve. Leviticus 17:11 is very, very important here where the sacrificial system should not be viewed as the nation of Israel sort of making up this system in order to keep God on their side. No, this is God taking the initiative, in love, so that there would be a means by which he would be able to dwell with the nation. They would be able to dwell in his presence. They would be his people; he would be their God. All of that is demonstration of his mercy, of his love, of his grace. And all of it eventually points forward to his provision in Jesus Christ who is the fulfillment of this. So that in him what these sacrifices typified now have come to reality so that we now know God in a New Covenant sense. We now have direct access to him through our great sacrifice, our Lord Jesus Christ.**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

**Well, the Old Testament sacrificial system indicated it in a number of ways, it demonstrated God's mercy, but one of the classic ways was on the Day of Atonement, when you had your tabernacle or temple, and the innermost part of that was called the holiest of all, and in there you had the Ark of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments in it, and the top of that box was called the mercy seat. And on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would take the blood of the lamb and offer the lamb at the altar outside the temple or tabernacle, then come through the veil into that holiest of all part and sprinkle the blood on the top of the box. And the idea was that God would be merciful when the blood of the lamb covered the law that was broken. Of course, that pointed to the fact of Jesus Christ was going to be the true Lamb whose blood would cover our having broken the law. But, notice, God's mercy founded on that blood covering our having broken the law.**

— Dr. Frank Barker

With this understanding of the priestly leadership and ceremonies in mind, we're ready to turn to the work of intercession that they performed on behalf of the people they represented.

## Intercession

We may define intercession as mediation; or petitioning for favor on another's behalf. An intercessor is someone who takes your side and pleads your case when you are in trouble, or who tries to reconcile disputes between you and another party.

Old Testament priests often interceded by means of their leadership and guidance, as well as through the ceremonies that God had assigned to them. For instance, they interceded between individuals when they settled legal disputes, and between the people and God when they presented offerings for atonement. But priests also performed other types of intercession.

One common form of intercession was petition for help. Priests often offered prayers that God would heal, rescue or otherwise aid his people. We find examples of this in 1 Samuel 1:17 and 1 Chronicles 16:4. As just one example, listen to the record of Job's intercession for his children in Job 1:5:

**When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have [his sons and daughters] purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts" (Job 1:5).**

As the priest over his household, Job interceded for his children to protect them from the consequences of their sin.

Another common form of intercession was the pronouncement of blessing. When priests blessed people they asked God to show favor to the people. We see this in the way Melchizedek blessed Abraham in Genesis 14:19-20, and in the blessing that the priests were taught to pronounce on the people in Numbers 6:22-27. For instance, listen to this account from 2 Chronicles 30:27:

**The priests and the Levites stood to bless the people, and God heard them, for their prayer reached heaven, his holy dwelling place (2 Chronicles 30:27).**

When the text says that God heard them, it means that he honored the priestly intercession by favoring the people they blessed. This aspect of priestly ministry is often echoed in our day during the benedictions offered by ministers at the conclusion of gathered worship. Many churches even repeat the same blessing first given to Aaron in Numbers 6.

As we've seen, the functions of priests were rather varied. They provided leadership, conducted ceremonies, and offered intercession. But as varied as these activities were, they were united by a constant purpose. They were all designed to make

God's people fit to live in his special presence, in order that they might receive all the blessings of his covenant.

Now that we've looked at the qualifications and function of priests, let's turn our attention to the expectations the Old Testament created for future priestly ministries.

## EXPECTATIONS

In the days of the Old Testament, the office of priest was dynamic and changing. Its specific duties and responsibilities changed throughout time. Melchizedek's priesthood was not precisely the same as Job's. Job's differed from Jethro's. And Jethro's differed from that of Aaron and his descendants. And the Old Testament also pointed toward further changes that would take place in the future.

To understand the expectations that the Old Testament priesthods created for the future, we'll look in two directions. First, we'll examine the historical development of the office throughout the Old Testament. And second, we'll focus on some specific prophecies about the future of the priestly office. Let's begin with the historical development of the office of priest.

### Historical Development

Because there has always been a need for human beings to have access to the special, holy presence of God, there has always been a need for priestly functions. In fact, priests have always been critical to God's long-term strategy for humanity and creation. But historically, the role of priests has sometimes shifted in response to the changing circumstances of God's people.

We'll consider the changing roles of priests during four different stages of history, beginning with the time of creation.

**Creation.** This is the time that corresponds to God's covenant with Adam. The Garden of Eden, in which humanity was placed, was itself a sanctuary where God walked and talked with his people. In this context, Adam and Eve served God in ways that resembled the service of the Aaronic priests in the tabernacle and temple. For this reason, we can say that the office of priest is as old as humanity itself. Listen to what Moses wrote in Genesis 2:15:

**The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15).**

In this passage, Moses described the work of Adam and Eve in the garden with the Hebrew words "*avad*," translated "work," and "*shamar*," translated "take care." In Numbers 3:7-8, Moses used this same combination of words to describe the work of the Levites in the Tabernacle. And we see other verbal parallels in places like Genesis 3:8 and 2 Samuel 7:6.

By using the same language to describe the work of humanity in the Garden of Eden and the work of the priests in the tabernacle, Moses indicated that Adam and Eve were the original priests, and that places like the tabernacle and temple were intended to fulfill the same function as the Garden of Eden. In fact, many scholars have suggested that the furnishings and decorations of the tabernacle and temple were specifically designed to recall the Garden of Eden.

In all events, humanity's priesthood in Eden consisted of ministering to God in his garden sanctuary, taking care of his holy things, and ensuring that the place was fit for him to inhabit. Moreover, God commanded Adam, Eve, and their descendants to become a kingdom of priests, expanding their work to the rest of the world, as well.

Listen to God's words to humanity in Genesis 1:28:

**Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28).**

God's command to fill and subdue the earth is often called the "cultural mandate," because it obligates humanity to cultivate and develop the whole world, in order to make it resemble the Garden of Eden. From a priestly perspective, humanity's job is to turn the entire world into God's sanctuary and to minister to him forever.

**When God created human beings in his image, he didn't do so for no reason at all. He gave us what is often called the "creation cultural mandate." It's helpful to look at that, not only in terms of our dominion over the earth, often what we associate with a kind of rule, kingly kind of role, but also priests. Even though sin had not entered the world, there's pictures in Genesis 2 of Eden as a kind of temple, garden sanctuary, so that our role in creation was to push the borders of Eden to the furthest extent of the earth. Ultimately, that comes in Christ, in the new heavens and new earth. At the heart of that priestly work as well is worship, so that all that we do is for God's glory, doing that creation mandate. Service — and those two ideas are there associated with a priestly work as well as a kind of kingly work. So, our creation cultural mandate is to be stewards, is to be God's creatures in relationship to him, to expand the borders of that garden sanctuary, to do so in worship, devotion, obedience, exploring all the resources of his creation, and that, of course, will be picked up ultimately in the new heavens and the new earth as well.**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

**In the book of Genesis we learn of the cultural mandate. It's a very important part of human vocation, what we are in God's eyes to be about as we live out the gift of life. We, of course, do not think in any way that the cultural mandate should trump, or lead us to neglect, the evangelism mandate. Both are from God, both are legitimate, both are**

**important. Essentially, the cultural mandate is a great gift and privilege. It's essentially the God of providence inviting his people created in his image, to have delegated responsibility, to care for, to steward, and to develop the rich potential of the created order, as faithful ambassadors or delegated representatives of the providential God himself. And so, just as we are to be creative people in the image of a creator, we are to be gracious, generous, and responsibly providing people in fulfilling the creation mandate.**

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

The first *changes* to the office of priest happened at humanity's fall into sin, when they ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 3.

***Fall.*** At this point, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden and had to begin presenting offerings of atonement for sin. We find potential references to this practice as early as Genesis 3:21, where the Lord covered Adam and Eve in the skins of animals. And we find a more explicit reference to this practice in Genesis 4:4, in Abel's animal sacrifice to the Lord.

Other references can also be found throughout this time period, such as: the sacrifices Noah offered after the flood in Genesis 8:20; the ram Abraham sacrificed in Genesis 22:13; and the sacrifices Jacob offered in Genesis 31:54. During this time, family heads tended to serve as priests over their descendants, and only a few priests were called to minister more broadly than that.

Another change that occurred at this time was the *location* of priestly ministry. Before the Fall, this had taken place exclusively in God's garden sanctuary in Eden. But when humanity was expelled from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3, God directed his priests to set aside other places to worship him, and to create memorial stones to mark places where he had met with them. Unlike the period of creation, at this point in history no single location could be described as God's dwelling place on earth.

The next major set of changes took place in the days of Israel's exodus from their slavery in Egypt.

***Exodus.*** After the nation of Israel had been enslaved by the Egyptian Pharaoh for over 400 years, they cried out to God and he released them in a powerful display of miracles. This event is described in the second book of the Bible, entitled Exodus.

During this time, God narrowed his priestly call from all humanity to the nation of Israel. As he said in Exodus 19:6, Israel was to be to him a kingdom of priests. He also set aside the tribe of Levi as his special servants. Most of the tribe served in roles that supported the smaller number of Levites who acted as priests for the nation. Within the Levites, only Aaron and his descendants were selected to be priests, with one man at a time serving as high priest. We find God's instructions regarding the new duties of the Aaronic priesthood throughout the book of Leviticus, as well as in some parts of the book of Numbers.

God also dictated the creation of the tabernacle during this period. The tabernacle was a large, ornate tent that the Israelites were able to carry with them during their

travels. It served essentially the same function that the Garden of Eden had served at the time of creation; it was God's earthly sanctuary, the place where he walked and talked with his people. After the Fall, God had met with people in various places from time to time. But with the creation of the tabernacle, God once again focused his worship in one location. And this place of worship was to be attended and maintained by God's chosen servants, the priests. The instructions for the tabernacle, and the record of its creation, can be found in Exodus 25–40.

God intended the changes in the priesthood during the Exodus to be steps toward fulfilling his original plan for humanity. His plan was to use the priests of Aaron's family first to change Israel into a kingdom of priests, and then through the fidelity and service of this special nation, to expand his kingdom to encompass the world.

The final changes to the office of priest in the Old Testament occurred during Israel's monarchy, when the nation of Israel had settled the Promised Land and was living under the rule of a king.

***Monarchy.*** The monarchical period had a false start with Saul, Israel's first king. But it began in earnest with Saul's successor David and his descendants.

When the kings of Israel reigned, they were closely involved with priestly service. For instance, David made plans for the temple. He made sure that the priestly services were performed. He also organized the priestly families and assigned specific tasks for them. These developments can be found in passages such as 1 Chronicles 15 and 16 and 23–28.

David also assigned duties to the other Levitical families, especially as gatekeepers and musicians. He even offered sacrifices and pronounced blessings on the people, joining with the priests from time to time, as seen in 2 Samuel 6:17–18. At one point, he even exchanged his royal garb for the Levite's linen ephod, as recorded in 1 Chronicles 15:27. These developments were maintained even past David's day, as we see in Ezra 8:20.

In David's day, the families allowed to serve as high priest narrowed to just two: those of Aaron's descendants Zadok and Abiathar. This information is recorded in 1 Chronicles 18:16.

After David, his son Solomon reigned as king over God's kingdom, and he involved himself in priestly services even more than David had. Solomon presided over the building of the temple. He supervised countless sacrifices. He led the people in prayer at the temple and pronounced blessings upon them, as his father had. These details are mentioned in 1 Chronicles 21:28; 2 Chronicles 3–6, and 1 Kings 8–9. They are also assumed in many of the psalms David wrote, including Psalms 5, 11, 18, 27, 65, 66 and 68.

Solomon also narrowed the high priestly line once more. Because Abiathar committed treason, Solomon excluded him and his family from priestly service, as we see in 1 Kings 2:26, 27, 35. This fulfilled the judgment passed upon the house of Eli, an earlier unfaithful priest in the days of the judges recorded in 1 Samuel 2:27–36.

While some specific services in the temple were reserved for priests alone, the kings of Judah often followed the examples of David and Solomon by involving themselves in priestly types of service. They were, in effect, royal priests in Solomon's temple.



The period of the monarchy eventually ended when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple in 587 or 586 B.C., and carried the people into exile. But around 515 B.C., during the restoration efforts after the exile, a second temple was built by the returning Israelites. At this time, the prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah announced that God had appointed Jeshua, a descendent of Zadok, as the high priest. They also announced that Jeshua would serve alongside Zerubbabel, a descendent of David, who would lead the restoration. Sadly, the efforts of Zerubbabel and Jeshua did not continue for long. In time, most priests and Levites turned away from God, and so did most of the nation. Israel's worship was corrupted, and God's judgment rested on the nation for hundreds of years.

Even so, during this time the people of Israel continued to look back to the days of David and Solomon. The faithful among them remembered what it was like when kings and priests served God as they should. And they hoped for a new day when royal and priestly duties would be performed more magnificently than ever before and God would welcome his repentant people into the blessings of his special presence.

Now that we've considered the expectations that were created by the historical development of the priestly office, we're ready to see how specific Old Testament prophecies also created expectations for future priests.

## Specific Prophecies

In this section, we'll focus on three specific Old Testament prophecies about the office of priest. The first expectation we'll consider is that there would eventually be a great high priest whose service would never end.

In various ways, the Old Testament indicated that one day the priesthood would culminate in a single high priest who would serve forever. God had appointed Aaron to be the high priest in the time of Moses, but the Old Testament also looked forward to a time when his priesthood would be surpassed. So Aaron's priesthood was temporary to last until the day when the Great High Priest would come. In fact, the hope of the Old Testament was that both offices would be united into one office under the Great High Priest and messianic King.

Perhaps the clearest statement of this idea can be found in Psalm 110:4, where we read these words:

**The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4).**

In the context of this psalm, God promised that the Messiah's service as priest would never end. It would last forever.

Hebrews 7 picks up on this idea and relates it directly to Jesus in his office of high priest over God's people. The same chapter also indicates that Christ's permanent priesthood is implied by the fact that it corresponds to the new covenant, which Jeremiah prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31. In that passage, Jeremiah indicated that life in the new covenant would be perfect and wonderful. And corresponding to this, the author of

Hebrews argued that this better covenant would require a better priesthood — one that would last forever.

Quoting Psalm 110:4, the author of Hebrews put it this way in Hebrews 7:21-22:

**The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever.” Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant (Hebrews 7:21-22).**

In conclusion, then, the Old Testament specifically prophesied that in the new covenant, God would appoint a great high priest whose service would never end.

A second expectation for the office of priest that was specifically prophesied in the Old Testament was that the Great High Priest would rule as king.

As we saw earlier, humanity served as both priests and kings in the Garden of Eden. And Melchizedek himself also served in both capacities. And although these offices were divided later in history, the Old Testament also prophesied that they would ultimately be reunited in the person of the Messiah.

Let’s look once more at Psalm 110, this time at verses 2-4, where the Lord made this promise about the future Messiah:

**The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies... The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:2-4).**

Here, God promised that the Messiah would be a descendant of David who would both rule as king and serve as priest.

This same idea is also in Zechariah 6:13, where we find this prophecy about the future Messiah:

**He will be a priest on his throne (Zechariah 6:13).**

According to the Old Testament, one expectation for the office of priest was that the Messiah would reunite it with the office of king.

The third specifically prophesied expectation for the office of priest was that God’s people themselves would become a kingdom of priests.

As we saw in Genesis 2:15, humanity began in the Garden of Eden by serving in a priestly capacity. So, it shouldn’t be surprising that in our restoration after the fall into sin, redeemed humanity would once again serve as God’s priests. And in fact, this is specifically prophesied in places like Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 61:6.

Both of these passages indicate that when the Messiah reigns as king, all God’s people will serve as faithful priests, and be united as a single nation or kingdom of priests. Theologians often refer to this as the priesthood of all believers. And the apostle Peter indicated that this was already coming to pass in his own day. Listen to what he wrote in 1 Peter 2:5:

**You also ... are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).**

As covenant reconcilers, the priests in the Old Testament continually reminded their people of the importance of their covenant relationship with God. And given the devastation that sin had brought into the creation, the priestly office was vital and necessary for the continued progress of God's kingdom and for the fulfillment of his purposes. But these purposes could not be fulfilled without the pivotal priestly figure of all history — the Messiah that the entire Old Testament anticipated.

Having looked at the Old Testament background to the office of priest, we're ready to turn to our second main topic: the fulfillment of the office of priest in Jesus.

## **FULFILLMENT IN JESUS**

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We should begin by noting that the Gospels and the New Testament epistles explicitly state that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament expectations of the priestly office. For instance, in Hebrews 3:1, we read this clear affirmation of Jesus' priestly ministry:

**Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the ... high priest whom we confess (Hebrews 3:1).**

And Hebrews 4:14 puts it this way:

**We have a great high priest ... Jesus the Son of God (Hebrews 4:14).**

As our Great High Priest, Jesus is the one that mediates between God and us, so that we can be accepted into God's special, holy presence. He is the one that ensures that we are holy and sanctified to God, so that we can live in God's presence and receive his covenant blessings.

We'll explore the fulfillment of the priestly office in Jesus by looking at the same categories we used to discuss its Old Testament background. First, we will see how Jesus fulfilled the qualifications of the office. Second, we'll look at how he performed its functions. And third, we'll see how he met the expectations for the office of priest. Let's look first at how Jesus meets the qualifications for the office of priest.

## **QUALIFICATIONS**

Many people have pointed out that Jesus never served in the temple or led liturgies, and he was not a descendant of Aaron. So, why did the New Testament writers say that Jesus performed priestly functions and ministries? And how was he even qualified to hold the office of priest? Simply put, Jesus was ultimately qualified for the

office because he is the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope for a royal priest whom God himself would appoint over all priestly services.

We'll look at Jesus' qualifications as priest in terms of the same qualifications we highlighted in the Old Testament background of the priestly office. First, we'll note that Jesus was appointed to his priesthood by God. And second, we'll see that he was also loyal to God. Let's look first at the fact that Jesus was appointed by God.

## Appointed by God

Hebrews 5:4-10 explicitly says that God appointed Jesus as high priest. Listen to what it says:

**No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest... [but] was designated by God to be high priest (Hebrews 5:4-10).**

Since God appointed him, Jesus certainly met this qualification. At the same time, we should admit that this appointment was somewhat unusual because Jesus did not have a Levitical priestly genealogy. You'll recall that in the beginning of the Old Testament, God had allowed many different types of people to be priests. But by the end of the Old Testament, he had given the priesthood only to the descendants of Zadok. Even so, the appointment of Jesus is not as unusual as it might first appear.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam was assigned to rule over the earth as God's vassal king. But his rule was also a priestly service, designed to turn the entire world into a place that would be suitable for God's glorious presence. And the offices of priest and king were also closely related in the kings of the monarchical period.

In much the same way, Christ is a royal priest. He rules as God's perfect vassal king. But his rule is also a priestly service preparing us and the earth for the glorious special presence of God. In this way, Christ actually fulfills what Adam and the rest of his descendants failed to do.

Listen once again to the way David spoke of the great Messiah in Psalm 110:1-4:

**The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies... The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:1-4).**

In this passage, the Messiah — whom David called "my Lord" — is described both with the royal imagery of his mighty scepter and rule, and as a priest.

David's prophecy looked forward to the day when one of his descendants would rise to such imperial majesty that he would fulfill not only royal service, but all priestly service as well, just as Melchizedek had done. This is why Hebrews 7:14 emphasizes the fact that Jesus is from the royal tribe of Judah, and not from the priestly tribe of Levi. The

fact that Jesus was both a Judahite king and the Great High Priest is proof that he is the long-awaited son of David, the Messiah.

**Probably a lot of it goes back to Genesis 14 and Melchizedek, who is described both as a king and as a priest because Abraham makes sacrifices and Melchizedek receives those as a priest would. But at the same time, he's clearly king of Salem. So there's a lot that spins off of that in the rest of the biblical narrative where kings and priests are one in the same sometimes. It's the 110th Psalm where a king is referred to as the "overseer of righteousness." Well, that's obviously got governmental aspects connected to it, but if you're overseeing righteousness, you're also sharing in a priestly function, because God's righteousness is God's will for the whole world to be righteous. And so as the king participates in that, even if there are designated priests, the king is still functioning in a priestly way. Then, of course, when you get to Jesus, you've got these streams converging, so that we refer to him as prophet, priest, and king. It's almost, well, it is — in the book of Hebrews, he's the new Melchizedek. He's the personification in the new covenant of what God really was about in the old covenant.**

— Dr. Steve Harper

Having seen that Jesus was appointed by God, we're ready to look at the fact that he also met the requirement of being loyal to God.

## **Loyal to God**

As we mentioned previously, priests were required to demonstrate a special measure of loyalty to God by worshiping and serving him alone, and by carefully carrying out the duties that God assigned to them. And one of the primary reasons for their duties was to ensure that God's people were also loyal to God, both morally and ceremonially, so that they could enter God's special presence without fear. This was one of the main services that priests provided.

Jesus met these same requirements with absolute perfection. He always worshiped and served God and God only. And he always obeyed the Father's commands. And through this priestly ministry, Jesus is able to prepare us to enter God's special holy presence.

In a general sense, we could look at the full content of all four gospels as proof of Jesus' loyalty to God. He followed the commission given to him by his Father; he spoke only what his Father gave him to say; and he did only those things that he saw his father doing. But there are also many particular passages in the New Testament that summarize these ideas explicitly, such as Matthew 26:42; John 5:19, 14:31, and 17:4; and Hebrews 7:5-7.

Jesus' perfect loyalty to God is a critical aspect of his success as our Great High Priest. Only by being completely loyal to God can he make his followers perfectly holy, and enable us to dwell in God's special holy presence for eternity. And we find many examples of this in Scripture.

For instance, he prayed specifically for our holiness in his high priestly prayer in John 17:19. And according to passages like Romans 15:16 and 1 Corinthians 6:11, God has already answered that prayer by making us holy in his sight.

Having seen that Jesus met the qualifications for priesthood, we're ready to turn to the way he fulfilled the functions of a priest.

## FUNCTIONS

We'll explore Jesus' function as priest by looking at the same priestly roles we identified in the Old Testament: first, priestly leadership over God's people; second, priestly ceremonies; and third, priestly intercession. Let's look first at how Jesus fulfilled the function of priestly leadership.

### Leadership

Although there are many aspects of Jesus' leadership we could highlight, we'll focus on the same three we mentioned in our survey of the Old Testament background of Jesus' priestly office, beginning with the leadership he offered in worship.

As the one who would be exalted as the Great High Priest, Jesus did many things to promote true and spiritual worship in the nation of Israel and among his followers. For instance, in Matthew 21:12-13, he drove the merchants and money changers from the temple because they were turning God's house of prayer into a den of robbers.

But most importantly, he made it possible for his people to approach God in the Holy Place of the heavenly temple. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle and later the temple were places that heaven and earth intersected. They were special locations where worshipers were simultaneously present on earth and in God's heavenly court. But in the New Testament, Jesus himself has taken over this function. So, instead of going to a special building to enter God's heavenly court, Jesus personally takes us there. Through him, we have been accepted into God's special, holy presence, where we receive the blessing of his fellowship.

Listen to the way Hebrews 10:19-22 talks about this:

**Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith (Hebrews 10:19-22).**

Jesus also offered priestly leadership in the form of special guidance in civil and ritual judgments.

For example, in Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus provided priestly judgment when his disciples were accused of violating the Sabbath. In Mark 7:19, he pronounced judgments about the ritual cleanness of food. And after healing the leper in Matthew 8, he provided the priestly declaration that the man was ceremonially clean, and commanded him to take the appropriate sacrifice to the temple. Although Jesus commanded the man to show himself to the priests, this was not for the purpose of asking them to judge his condition. Rather, according to Matthew 8:4, it was to be a testimony of Jesus' power and authority.

The third type of priestly leadership we have mentioned is teaching. And Jesus performed this function as well.

Now, it's true that Israel had many different types of teachers. Prophets were teachers who proclaimed God's covenant and will. Parents taught their children. Rabbis and elders taught their communities. Priests, however, were particularly concerned with teaching repentance and fidelity so that God's people would be welcomed into his special presence. We see an example of this in Nehemiah 8. And Jesus' teaching often served this priestly function, too.

For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, Jesus explained the true intention and application of God's law in order to lead those who heard him into covenant fidelity. And both repentance and faithfulness were regular refrains in his teaching, as we can see in passages like Matthew 4:17, Luke 5:32, and John 14:15-24.

Now that we've seen that Jesus filled the priestly role of leadership, let's take a look at the way he also fulfilled priestly functions with regard to ceremonies.

## Ceremonies

Without a doubt, Jesus' death on the cross was the greatest ceremonial aspect of his priestly ministry.

Jesus himself participated in the ceremonies of Israel. In fact, many of them are mentioned in John's gospel. But none of these ceremonies accomplished redemption for God's people except Jesus sacrifice on the cross. Without a doubt, Jesus' crucifixion was the greatest ceremonial aspect of his priestly ministry. The Law of Moses required obedience from Israel, but because God knew Israel would continue to disobey, God also commanded Israel to offer sacrifices to God to atone for these sins. But as important as these sacrifices were, they had to be offered repeatedly year after year — none of them fully took away Israel's sin. So Jesus came and offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin. His atoning sacrifice accomplished redemption in a way that the sacrifices of Israel could never do. And so Jesus fulfilled Israel's priestly expectations in his once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

**Well, the Old Testament sacrifices anticipated a day when there would be a sacrifice that would take away sin once and for all. And Jesus's role at the cross is described by the Bible as being both a sacrifice for sin, but also himself as a priest offering that sacrifice. In a sense he fulfills both of those functions. He provides the Lamb of God**

**who will take away the sins of the world. But Jesus also is the priest who is in a sense making that offering of himself to provide the sacrifice that will end all other sacrifices.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

**The relationship between Jesus' death and Old Testament sacrifices could be developed in a whole host of ways. At the heart, the Old Testament sacrifices must be placed within the old covenant that God gave to the nation of Israel. The sacrificial system was the means by which the people's sin was removed; God's wrath was turned back; there was relationship between God and his people. Those sacrifices, we say, are types; they're patterns; they point forward to something greater. Even in the Old Testament there's plenty of hints that just by the offering of an animal will never be enough to take away sin. It was never intended to be ultimately in terms of that which would remove sin. They were patterns of something greater. But they point forward to the sacrifice of Christ in that he is the one who, like that sacrifice, is our substitute. He is the one who takes our place. He is one who does so in a far greater way because he is human. He takes on our humanity. Those animal sacrifices didn't. Yet, he is also God the Son, God the Son incarnate, so that he now fulfills his own righteous requirements putting away our sin, standing as our representative, as our substitute, as our priest. And fulfills all of what those sacrifices pointed forward to, restores us to relationship with God, and brings us back to what God made us to be in the first place — his people, living for him, serving him, carrying out our role and duty as his image bearers in this world.**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

As we saw earlier, the Old Testament priests were responsible for a variety of offerings, including offerings for sin, thanksgiving and fellowship. And in his death on the cross, Jesus offered the single sacrifice that formed the meritorious basis for every sacrifice that had ever been offered throughout history. Every prior offering for atonement merely foreshadowed the offering that Jesus rendered when he died on the cross. This truth is taught in passages like Romans 3:25 and 8:3, and 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

As just one example, listen to the words of Hebrews 10:1-4:

**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... But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:1-4).**



Old Testament sacrifices benefited the worshipers not on the basis of the sacrifices themselves, but in the ways they anticipated the special sacrifice that Christ would eventually render on the cross. Moreover, the benefit they provided would never be complete until Jesus offered the one sacrifice to which all the others pointed. This is why the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not able to remove sin permanently. They were merely the means by which God postponed his wrath and exercised patience until the time when Jesus died on the cross.

In this regard, Jesus was not just the substance to which all previous atoning offerings had pointed. He was also the final atonement. Now that the fullness of atoning offerings has been realized in Jesus, there is no longer any reason to offer the shadows. This is why Christians do not present the atoning offerings described in the Old Testament. It's not because we believe atoning sacrifices are unnecessary. On the contrary, we know atonement is absolutely necessary. The reason we don't present offerings for atonement is that we believe Jesus' singular sacrifice has completely fulfilled the need for atonement for all God's faithful people for all time. And by this one act, he has secured our holiness, making us able to dwell in God's special, holy presence.

As we read in Hebrews 10:10:

**We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Hebrews 10:10).**

Jesus' sacrifice ushered in the new age of the kingdom of God; it was the beginning of the end of the exile and judgment of God's people. This one sacrifice made God's forgiveness directly accessible in every nation on earth. But it also signaled the end of God's patience and forbearance toward many unbelievers.

As we read in Acts 17:30, prior to Christ's sacrifice God had been slow to bring judgment against those who were ignorant of the truth. But Christ's sacrifice announced the truth in a way that made ignorance far less excusable. As a result, God began to bring judgment against sinners with greater frequency and severity when they failed to repent at the preaching of the gospel.

**Some skeptics view the death of Jesus as nothing more than the tragic end to a misguided career. But for believers, the death of Christ was intentional, and significant, and redemptive. And part of how we understand the mysterious dynamics of the cross, part of how we understand that, is that it is a fulfillment of the type, or antecedent motif, of Old Testament sacrifice. Now once again there are many people today who are very uncomfortable about any requirement of blood. It seems so primitive, it seems so unacceptable to a more enlightened and civilized people. I think it's important for us to realize that God is not some cosmic vampire who requires blood to assuage his needs. The Old Testament sacrifice, the Old Testament sacrificial system, was bold, brutal, and bracing, all of this to underscore the seriousness of the sin that it addresses. The Old Testament sacrificial system was a reminder to ancient peoples that**

**sin must be addressed in order to restore, if you will, the moral symmetry of God's universe. And Jesus Christ comes as the fulfillment of that need in such a way that the requirements of God's justice and the moral symmetry of the universe are satisfied by an unprecedented act of self-giving love. The Old Testament points to, and is fulfilled in Christ right down to the details of the ancient sacrificial system.**

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

Having seen how Jesus fulfilled his priestly role through leadership and ceremonies, we should look at how he fulfilled the related priestly function of intercession.

## **Intercession**

Earlier in this lesson, we said that intercession is mediation or petitioning for favor on another's behalf. This is something that characterized Jesus' earthly ministry, and that continues to characterize his ministry in heaven.

**I've a friend who has asked me, "Well, if Jesus gets us to God, why do we still need Jesus? Why don't we just dispense with him now that he's gotten us to God and just pray to the Father? We don't really need Jesus anymore." Well, that misses the ongoing role of Jesus. Because the New Testament says that Jesus is the one mediator between God and man, present tense, the man Jesus, and that he lives forever to intercede for us. It doesn't mean in the least that Jesus' atoning work on the cross was insufficient in some way. To be sure, Jesus' atoning work is once-for-all, it's complete; nothing ever needs to be added to it again. But Jesus still has an ongoing, personal, relational role that he plays in our lives as our advocate, our mediator, our representation. He's our lawyer that daily, continually goes before the great judge and pleads our case. The great news is because of his atoning work he never loses a case. He's always appealing to his perfect, completed work on our behalf in his intercessory role as our Great High Priest, and it's always successful, it's always effective. But it's ongoing, and relational, and dynamic. And so Jesus, based on his finished atoning work, continues as our mediator, and our intercessor, as our Great High Priest.**

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

One of the most explicit examples of Jesus' intercessory work in the Bible is his prayer for his disciples on the night of his arrest and trial, recorded in John 17. In fact, this prayer is typically called his "High Priestly Prayer." In this prayer, Jesus included

many petitions for the apostles. And in John 17:20-21, he also prayed on behalf of those who would become his disciples through their evangelistic ministry.

Jesus continued his intercessory work in the action of his death on the cross, where he mediated between God and humanity in the most effective way possible. And now that he has ascended into heaven, we're told that he continues to intercede for us in the heavenly temple by presenting his own blood on the altar and pleading before the Father on our behalf. As we read in Hebrews 7:24-25:

**Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:24-25).**

Our salvation is permanently secure because Jesus, our Great High Priest, is perpetually interceding on our behalf, asking the Father to accept the merit of the Son's death in payment for every sin we commit.

Jesus perfectly fulfilled the function of the Old Testament priesthood. He provided leadership, performed ceremonies — including the most important ceremony of all time, his sacrifice on the cross — and he offered intercession for his people. In fact, he continues to perform these basic functions today, through his church and through his high priestly work in the heavenly courts. So, as his followers, it's our responsibility to acknowledge and to rely on Jesus as our only access to the Father, and submit to his ministry as he prepares us to enter God's special holy presence.

With Jesus' qualifications and functions as a priest in mind, let's look at how he met the Old Testament expectations for the priestly office.

## EXPECTATIONS

As we saw earlier in this lesson, the historical development of the priestly office created the expectation that in the future, the office of priest would continue to mediate between God and his people so that the people could be accepted into God's special, holy presence. And we've already seen that Jesus fulfilled these expectations by performing the functions of the office of priest. So, in this section of our lesson, we'll focus our attention on the way Jesus fulfilled specific Old Testament prophecies about the future of the priestly office.

Our discussion will divide into three parts. First, we'll look at the prophecy regarding the Great High Priest. Second, we'll explore the prophecy about this great priest serving as king. And third, we'll look at the prophecy that God's people would become a kingdom of priests. Let's start by seeing how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the Great High Priest.

### Great High Priest

In various ways, sometimes explicitly, the Old Testament foretold that there would be a future Great High Priest who would usher in the messianic age, and who

would in fact be the Messiah himself. According to Psalm 110, this Great High Priest would be of the “order of Melchizedek,” meaning that he would not descend from Aaron. He would also serve in his office forever, meaning that death could not stop him from fulfilling his function. And according to the author of Hebrews, all these prophecies came true in Jesus.

Hebrews 7:21-22 quotes Psalm 110:4, and comments on it this way:

**The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever.” Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant (Hebrews 7:21-22).**

The author of Hebrews said that when God swore that the Messiah would be a priest forever, he rendered it certain that the future Great High Priest would be the Messiah that would bring in the new covenant. And according to this same passage in Hebrews, Jesus is that Great High Priest.

In fact, Hebrews mentions Jesus’ role as this prophesied Great High Priest at least ten different times. It also regularly refers to Jesus as “Christ” or “Messiah,” and it explicitly says that he is the one who brings the new covenant in chapters 8, 9, and 12. More than any other book of the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews proves beyond any doubt that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament expectation of the Great High Priest.

The second Old Testament expectation that Jesus fulfilled was that the Great High Priest would also rule as king.

## Priest as King

We’ve seen that from the time of Adam to the time of Abraham, the offices of priest and king were often united in the same person. And although they were separated in the days of Israel’s monarchy, the Old Testament prophesied that they would ultimately be reunited in the person of the Messiah. This point was made in both Psalm 110:2-4, and Zechariah 6:13.

And as we have seen in this and earlier lessons, when Jesus came as Messiah, he took on both the office of king and the office of high priest. This is stated in passages such as Mark 8:29; Luke 23:3; and Hebrews 8–9.

Before Jesus came, the Aaronic priesthood had served God’s people for well over 1,000 years. But their ministry had always pointed beyond itself to the coming Messiah who would be both priest and king. And in fact, according to Acts 6:7, many of the priests in Jerusalem and Israel recognized Jesus as the Messiah and became his followers.

Since Jesus neither established an independent priesthood nor confirmed the perpetual ministry of the temple and the Aaronic priesthood, the support he received from Israelite priests indicates that these priests understood the Old Testament teaching that when the Messiah came, he would reunite the offices of high priest and king in his person. And as we’ve seen, this is exactly what Jesus did.

The third specifically prophesied expectation that Jesus’ priesthood fulfilled was that the Great High Priest would lead God’s people to become a kingdom of priests.

## Kingdom of Priests

We've already seen that Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 61:6 both foretell a time when God's people would become a nation or kingdom of priests. They would all serve in God's holy presence by doing the work he assigned them, offering sacrifices of praise and obedience, and performing other priestly functions. And significantly, in Jesus' sermon recorded in Luke 4, the Lord quoted from Isaiah 61 and claimed to be fulfilling it. In this way, Jesus implied that he himself would turn God's people into a kingdom of priests. And according to other portions of the New Testament, this is precisely what he did.

For instance, in 1 Peter 2:5, Peter referred to the church as a "holy priesthood." And in verse 9, he called it a "royal priesthood." And we find the same idea in Revelation 1:6, 5:10, and 20:6.

As just one example, listen to these words about Jesus from Revelation 1:6:

**[He] has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father (Revelation 1:6).**

As Messiah, Jesus is the Great High Priest who rules as king, and who appoints all his followers to serve as priests in his kingdom.

**One of the things we learn from the Old Testament is that the key religious figures were priests. We find in the New Testament that not a subset of Christians, but all believers are now priests. This truth is often articulated in the familiar phrase, "the priesthood of all believers." The point being underscored there is that all Christians are called and empowered to minister, to be the hands, the heart, the legs of Jesus, the body of Christ. Now, this is a tremendously empowering truth. One of the historically dramatic consequences of getting a hold of this wonderful truth is that no one need any longer to consider another human being a necessary conduit, or mediator between them and God. Any structure that puts a middleman between you and God is fraught with opportunities for abuse and social control and bondage. So this is a tremendously empowering dignifying and liberating truth, and yet, it's a truth that does not undermine in any way the complimentary truth that God has gifted his body with a diversity of gifts, and that among those gifts, one of the ones that I have come to appreciate in others who have ministered to me, is the pastoral gift. The pastoral gift requires a special heart. It requires the heart and the skills to shepherd, to guide, to encourage, to comfort. This is not to stand between anyone and their God. This is not to undermine their right to interpret the Scriptures as God enlightens their own mind as they do their good work and discipline themselves for this task. But it is a grace that is provided to us, to help**

**us in the journey in which every one of us is a priest, and every one of these priests values and treasures pastoral care.**

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

Jesus' fulfillment of the priestly office reminds us of something very important. God's original purposes in creation have been complicated by sin, but never overwhelmed by sin. Jesus' own arrival and exact fulfillment of the priestly requirements show his fidelity to the goodness of God's plan. His consolidation of the office and its ultimate meaning shows his centrality in the advance of God's plan. And as the Great High Priest who rules as king, Jesus fulfills the original and expected aspects of priestly ministry. So, as his people, we have great reason to honor and worship and trust Jesus, and to serve him loyally as his kingdom of priests.

So far, we've explored the Old Testament background to the office of priest, and its fulfillment in Jesus. So, at this point, we're ready to consider the modern application of Jesus' priesthood. What implications does Jesus' role as our Great High Priest have for our lives today?

## **MODERN APPLICATION**

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One convenient way to approach the modern application of Christ's priestly work can be found in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, answer number 25, which says:

**Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.**

In this answer, the *Catechism* summarizes Christ's priestly work in terms of his ministry to believers. And it mentions at least three aspects of this work. First, it speaks of Christ's ministry of self-sacrifice. Second, it says that his once-for-all-time sacrificial ministry effected reconciliation between believers and God. And third, it lists his continual intercession between believers and God.

Our consideration of the modern application of Jesus' office of priest will follow the emphases of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. First, we'll look at Christ's sacrifice. Second, we'll focus on his work of reconciliation. And third, we'll consider the application of Christ's intercession. Let's turn first to sacrifice.

### **SACRIFICE**

We'll examine the application of Christ's sacrifice by looking at three responses we should have to it: trust in him for salvation; faithful service to him and those he loves; and worship. Let's start by looking at the matter of trust.

## Trust

Scripture teaches that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the only effective basis for God's gift of salvation. Christ died on the cross to save sinners. To use the vocabulary we learned earlier in this lesson, he propitiated God, satisfying God's justice and wrath, in order to expiate, or take away, the guilt of everyone that has faith in him.

And that faith is critical. In order to receive the forgiveness of sins that Christ offers, we have to trust him, and him *alone*. We have to believe that he is the Son of God who died for our sins, and that we are forgiven only because of the sacrifice he offered for us. Scripture speaks of this trust in places like John 20:31, Romans 10:9-10, and 1 John 4:14-16.

Followers of Christ must trust that our salvation is based on Jesus' sacrifice, and that it's effective only because of his work. No one else can save us.

As Peter preached in Acts 4:12:

**Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).**

We can't earn salvation. No church or saint can give it to us. We must trust only in the merits of Christ and his sacrifice to save us.

When we put our trust in Jesus alone, we can have confidence and joy before God. Jesus faithfully did everything the Father commanded. And we can be assured that he will faithfully do everything he has promised to us as well.

As we read in Hebrews 10:19-22:

**We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith (Hebrews 10:19-22).**

The confidence mentioned here could also be called trust. It's the firm belief that Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient to atone for our sin, and that there is no way it can fail to save us.

**One of the signs that we are saved is that we have a sense of being saved. We have a sense of being part of God's family. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit testifies with our spirit that we're children of God. And so, true children of God have a sense of that adoption. But that doesn't mean we can't have fluctuations in the degree of certainty or assurance that we do have about our salvation. We do want to be growing in that assurance, but it certainly can come and go over time. We need to seek to understand the gospel, to preach it to ourselves everyday so that we understand what Jesus has done for us when he took our place, and help one another. That's what we do in fellowship, we help one another be more sure of our adoption, of our salvation, of**

our forgiveness, that the Holy Spirit presses this home to us as we sit under the preaching of the word and we grow in our confidence in Christ and what he's done for us. So, the assurance of salvation every believer has comes and goes from day to day, but there should be in general, a continual growth in it over time.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Can true believers doubt their salvation? Absolutely. And one sees examples of it in Scripture. I think you see in the cases of Elijah sitting underneath the juniper tree; you see David in some of his psalms of enormous lament asking questions with regard to his relationship with God. I think you see in the biography of Peter, perhaps immediately after the denial episode, when he goes out and weeps. Sure. True believers may doubt their salvation. You know, our salvation is not, "I'm saved by the amount of assurance I have." Sometimes in evangelical circles, we tend to go in that direction. We ask people to give their testimony — I have a testimony; I have a Paul-like conversion in that it was sudden and dramatic. I can give you an hour and a minute if you press me. There was one day when I didn't believe Jesus existed nor did I care, and within 24 hours, I believed he was the Son of God and my Savior. But I am saved by grace through faith in the finished work and accomplishment of Christ alone and not on the amount of assurance I have. There are all kinds of things that can rob you of your assurance. Sudden dark providences, when the Lord takes away the woman or man that you love most in all the world, that can shake you. Sometimes there are physical, psychosomatic reasons. Some people are prone to seeing the glass half empty. They are constitutionally questioners. We all know the "Eeyores" of the world, and I think I'm probably one of them, that tends to ask questions of that nature. There are factors, divine factors, the *Westminster Confession*, for example, in the 17th century suggested that God sometimes withdraws the light of his countenance from us, distancing himself in order to make us want him more, that the very act of missing him grows us and ultimately affirms our faith. That's never a pleasant thing to experience. But parents will sometimes do that. They will withdraw their hands from a child who is just beginning to walk. They are there, ready to catch them if they fall, but they're on their own for a second. And something like that, God does with us, making us yearn for him and causing us to grow as a consequence.

— Dr. Derek W.H. Thomas



Now that we've considered trust as a response to Christ's sacrifice, let's turn to the service his sacrifice should inspire us to render.

## Service

The Bible teaches that Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf should inspire us to serve him faithfully. Throughout Romans 6, Paul made it clear that because Jesus died to save us, we are obligated to love and to obey him. He died to give us new life — life that is free from the mastery of sin. And one way we should express our thanks for this salvation is to fight against sin in our lives, to refuse to submit ourselves to it again.

As Paul wrote in Romans 6:2-4:

**We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ... We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:2-4).**

Jesus died in part so that we could be free from sin's mastery. And the only appropriate response to that sacrifice is to live in ways that please him.

Scripture also mentions many other ways that we can serve Christ in light of his sacrifice. Obviously, we should follow the example of Christ by being willing to suffer and even to die for his purposes. In fact, passages like Acts 5:41 and Philippians 1:29 indicate that it's a great honor and blessing when we suffer for the sake of Christ.

And the Bible also encourages us to serve Christ by sacrificing ourselves for the same people that Jesus died to save. It teaches us to be patient and compassionate with each other in Ephesians 4:32–5:2. It instructs us to give up our freedoms for the sake of those who are weaker in faith in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. And it even commands us to lay down our lives, just as Christ did, for the sake of other believers. As John wrote in 1 John 3:16:

**This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16).**

Jesus' once-for-all-time sacrifice of atonement on the cross was completely sufficient for its intended purpose, namely, taking on himself God's just punishment for sins. We could never atone for ourselves, let alone for another human being. But we *can* follow Jesus' example by laying down our lives for the sake of others.

And if we should be willing to die for them, then we should also be willing to make lesser sacrifices for them, parting with our time, our money, our comfort, and our possessions in order to serve them.

It's easy to talk about how important it is to love others, and to sacrifice for them. But sometimes it's hard for us to follow through with these ideas. To love people well, we have to sacrifice things we often hold very dear to us — our time, our finances, and our comfort. These are just a few of the sacrifices necessary to love others. It's so

difficult for us to value the kingdom of God and his righteousness, more than our own comforts. But when we don't, we miss out on one important truth: we gain more in offering these sacrifices than the sacrifices themselves. We gain the opportunity to worship God and see his reign extend in this world by the way we give of our lives for the sake of others.

Now that we've considered trust and service as two modern applications of Christ's sacrifice, let's turn our attention to worship.

## Worship

As Christians, we often find ourselves motivated to worship Jesus when we think about what he did for us on the cross. His selfless sacrifice rightly inspires our hearts to praise him for the great love he showed to us. And it moves us to thank him again and again for the incredible blessings of salvation that he purchased for us.

And Jesus' sacrifice should also motivate us to worship the Father and the Spirit. After all, according to passages like John 14:31, Jesus' sacrifice was the plan of the Father. And Hebrews 9:14 teaches us that Jesus offered his sacrifice through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, the Father and the Spirit deserve the same praise and worship that we give to Jesus.

And besides *motivating* us to worship, Jesus' sacrifice also serves as a *model* for worship. Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 12:1:

**Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship (Romans 12:1).**

This passage naturally raises two questions. First, how was Jesus' death on the cross an act of worship? And second, how can we pattern our own worship after it?

In answer to the first question, Jesus' death on the cross was an act of worship because it fulfilled the Old Testament types and foreshadows set by the sacrifices in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God's worship centered around sacrifice. And Hebrews 9 teaches us that Jesus' sacrifice was the substance to which all these Old Testament sacrifices pointed. It also says that Jesus was not passively sacrificed for us. Rather, he actively sacrificed himself. He was the high priest that followed the worship regulations of the old covenant, and presented himself to God as an act of sacrificial worship. And for this reason, our sacrificial acts also constitute worship.

But how can we pattern our worship after Jesus' sacrifice? What kind of sacrificial acts should we offer? Well, Scripture indicates many things we can do that God counts as sacrifice. As we've already seen, Romans 12:1 says that one way we imitate Christ's sacrifice is by offering our bodies to God. But verse 2 goes on to explain the meaning of this: We are not to conform ourselves to the behavior of the world; rather, we are to let our renewed minds in Christ lead us into new patterns of behavior. We are to abstain from sinful uses of our bodies, and to behave in new ways that honor God.

Ephesians 5:1-2 teaches that a second way we imitate Christ's sacrifice is by living a life of love. Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate act of love. So, when we are kind and compassionate to each other, we're patterning our own lives after Christ's loving sacrifice.

And Philippians 4:18 suggests a third way we can worship God through sacrifice: by giving our money, resources and time to help other believers. Paul said that the Philippians' gifts to him were offerings and sacrifices to God because they were costly to the Philippians and because they benefited those that God loves.

Now, of course, these suggestions don't exhaust the possibilities of worshiping God through sacrifice. But they're a good starting point for us as we follow in Christ's footsteps of worshiping God through loving sacrifice.

Now that we've looked at some ways we should draw practical applications from Jesus' sacrifice, we're ready to see how his priestly reconciliation should impact our lives.

## RECONCILIATION

We'll look at the modern application of Jesus' work of priestly reconciliation in three ways. First we'll see that it brings us peace with God. Second, we'll look at the unity it fosters. And third, we'll consider the mission it assigns to us. Let's look first at our peace with God.

### Peace

When Jesus reconciles us to God, he makes peace between us and God. Before this reconciliation, our rebellion against God had made us his enemies, as we read in places like Romans 5:10 and Ephesians 2:2. At that time, we deserved God's justice and wrath. But by reconciling us to God, Jesus put an end to this enmity. He quenched God's wrath, and made peace between us.

Now, instead of being God's enemies, we are the children he loves, and faithful citizens in his kingdom. And this means that we never need to fear God in the way we fear enemies. We never need to think that he wants to destroy us. Our lives are hidden in Christ, so that the same peace that exists between God the Father and God the Son also exists between us and God. And this kind of peace ought to move our hearts to praise, our hands to act, and our minds to know more and more about our great God.

Listen to the way Paul talked about this in Colossians 1:19-22:

**God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you**

**holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation (Colossians 1:19-22).**

**The question of, "We have peace with God," I mean that's very, very clear. Why then the discipline of his children, of believers? I think the simple answer is because he loves us. To have peace with God means that we are brought back into relationship with him. We were created to know God, to serve him, to love him, to obey him, to know him in an intimate way. And our sin cuts us off from that. Salvation brings us back — peace, reconciliation, other images that convey what salvation is — so that we are now in relationship with him. When we sin, he loves us that he doesn't let us go our own way. He pulls us back. He disciplines us. I mean, the imagery that's used in Scripture as of a parent to a child. So that with my children, I am not caring for them, loving them, if I let them do things that hurt them, do things that turn away from what I've commanded them. Our Father in heaven, through our Lord Jesus Christ, disciplines us so that we are now conformed to the image of Christ. That is for our good. So that if we do not experience the discipline of God, that should be a concern to us. Discipline is not a bad thing; it's a good thing, and it demonstrates God's love for his children.**

**— Dr. Stephen Wellum**

The peace we have with God should move our hearts to praise God by proclaiming and thanking him for his great kindness to us. It should inspire us to speak words to and about God and his character in prayer. It should motivate us to meditate on the great things he has done in our lives, to consider new ways that we can love and obey him. And it should give us the desire to encourage those around us by reminding them of the peace that believers already have with God, and that unbelievers can also have if they are reconciled to him.

Our peace with God should also move our hands to act. We should make peace with other human beings. We should demonstrate the blessings of God's peaceful kingdom in the form of moral and social justice, and care for the needy. And we should comfort and counsel those whose hearts are broken by the lack of peace and blessing in their own lives.

And the peace we have with God should also motivate us to know and understand more and more about our great God and Savior. His word tells us to be conformed in our minds to God's way of thinking by thinking his thoughts after him. And to rest peacefully in his sufficiency, not worrying that God might abandon us to the world, but remaining confident in the knowledge that he loves us and takes care of us.

A second way Jesus' priestly ministry of reconciliation applies to our lives is in manifestations of unity among the people of God.

## Unity

One theme that frequently appears in the New Testament is that those who love God will also love the people God loves. As we read in 1 John 4:21:

**Whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 John 4:21).**

When God is reconciled to a person, we should be reconciled to that person too.

This is why the apostle Paul urged his readers to recognize the great gift of reconciliation they had received from God, and to express it in unity with other believers. In the early church, he often applied this idea to the tense relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the church.

Listen to what he said in Ephesians 2:13-16:

**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of [Jews and Gentiles], thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2:13-16).**

We find a similar emphasis on unity in places like John 17:23, Romans 15:5, and Ephesians 4:3-13.

The modern church is rarely faced with the specific issue of right relationships between Jews and Gentiles. But we have many problems that are similar to this. We struggle with racial, ethnic, and national animosities among believers. And Jesus' ministry of reconciliation can help us pursue unity in these areas. We have all been reconciled to God and to each other through our union with Christ. And this unity should be expressed in our relationships in the church. It should make us cherish and pursue God's goal of a unified church, even though that sometimes means laying aside the things that distinguish us from each other.

Besides peace and unity, a third application we can draw from Christ's priestly ministry of reconciliation is the mission we have been assigned of fulfilling our own ministry of reconciliation in the world.

## Mission

Jesus' ministry of priestly reconciliation is not yet complete. His sacrifice purchased and guaranteed reconciliation. But that reconciliation has not yet been applied to the entire world. So, at this stage of history, Jesus has appointed the church to further his ministry of reconciliation. We are his ambassadors of reconciliation. And it's our job to proclaim the gospel that reconciles sinners to God. Listen to how Paul described our mission in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20:

**God ... reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).**

The offer of reconciliation to God continues to be a vital ministry of the church. Paul told the Corinthians that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and that he is continuing to reconcile the whole world to himself. And it's our responsibility as Christ's followers to proclaim this message to others, so that they can also be reconciled to God through him. We do this primarily by announcing the good news that through Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension, sinners can find peace with God.

Now that we've looked at Jesus' priestly ministry in terms of sacrifice and reconciliation, we should turn to the modern application of Jesus' priestly intercession.

## **INTERCESSION**

We'll examine the modern application of Jesus' priestly intercession under two headings. First, we'll see that it enables us to appeal to God for ourselves. And second, we'll see that Christ's intercession obligates us to advocate for other people. Let's look first at how it enables us to appeal to God for our own needs.

### **Appeal**

As we've seen, Jesus intercedes for us by reminding God the Father of his sacrifice on our behalf, and by asking the Father to forgive and to bless us on the basis of this sacrifice. And because the Father loves the Son and values his sacrifice, he responds positively to the Son's intercession for us. He hears and answers Christ's priestly petitions, so that forgiveness, sanctification, life, and all the other blessings of salvation can continually be applied to us.

And one implication of this is that we can approach the Father every day with our needs, knowing that he listens to our prayers because our Great High Priest is praying for us. We see this in Ephesians 3:12, Hebrews 10:19, and many other places.

As just one example, listen to Hebrews 4:14-16:

**Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of**

**grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).**

As the author of Hebrews pointed out, Jesus has “gone through the heavens.” That is, he has entered the heavenly sanctuary with his own blood in order to make intercession for us. And because of his intercession, we can have confidence that God favors us, and is inclined to give us mercy and grace when we pray to him.

We can appeal to the creator of all things for all of our needs, whether they are needs as deep as for forgiveness and salvation, or as common as prayers for daily food, clothing and shelter. No need is so small that it falls outside the scope of Christ’s intercession on our behalf. And no need is so great that the value of his sacrifice does not cover it. And for this reason, we should be encouraged to be bold and confident in our prayers, appealing to our loving heavenly Father for all our needs and righteous desires.

With this understanding of how Christ’s intercession gives us the right and confidence to appeal to God for ourselves, let’s look at how it encourages us to advocate for others.

## **Advocate**

**With Jesus already interceding, why would we bother to pray for other people? I think the main reason is two words — “Follow Me.” If Jesus is interceding, he says, I want you to follow me and I want you to intercede as well. I also believe that our prayers do have impact. I also believe, and I think Scripture teaches, not only do they have impact, but there’s going to be times when you don’t pray and some things don’t get done because you didn’t pray. So, do we believe in prayer? Yes. But why? It’s because Jesus said, “Follow me,” and he prayed.**

— Dr. Matt Friedeman

One of the important lessons of Christ’s heavenly intercession is that we should follow his example by advocating for others in prayer. Our love and concern for others should motivate us to talk to God on their behalf, asking him to show his mercy and love to them in whatever circumstances they’re facing.

Listen to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:18:

**Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18).**

Here, Paul instructed all believers to approach God on behalf of others. And of course, whenever we do this, our advocacy is based on Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf, just like Jesus’ own advocacy for us.

**So when I ask myself, why does Jesus pray, he knows my needs, he understands my needs, why would he have to intercede for me? There must be something at the base of intercession that is an example of the heart of God, and that is that he bears, he carries. In the Lord's incarnate life, in the triune life, there's a bearing, a love that receives the needs of humanity. That's the foundation of the cross, the foundation of my walking with Jesus. And so the Lord says to me in a command form because he wants me to understand reality, but he's also offering me the chance to bear somebody else in my heart. If I can say it this way, the answer to every person's need is found in somebody else. Now the answer to all of our needs of course is found in the heart of Jesus. But he, making us in his image and calling us to be his disciples, has said I want you to also bear. I want you to be priests like the Israelite priests. I want you to bear in your heart like Aaron. I want you to bear in your heart like I did, the needs of the world. And so intercession is an expression of the very heart of God.**

— Dr. Bill Ury

Intercessory prayers of advocacy can apply to any aspect of life. For example, we are encouraged to pray for the success of Christian ministries in places like Romans 15:30; Ephesians 6:20; Colossians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; and Hebrews 13:19.

We're taught to pray for those in spiritual danger or sin, as we see in 1 John 5:16. We should pray for others to receive protection from temptation, following Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:13, and his model in Luke 22:32. And we should pray for their health, asking God to heal injuries of both body and mind. Listen to these instructions from James in James 5:14-16:

**Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (James 5:14-16).**

James taught that when we advocate for others in the name of the Lord, that is, when we intercede for them by reminding the Lord they belong to Christ, the Lord is inclined to receive our advocacy favorably, and to grant our petitions. And for this reason, we should take full advantage of this privilege, regularly advocating for those in need.

**I have an unshakable confidence in the sovereignty of God. I have an absolute confidence that Jesus Christ right now is interceding for me and for all believers before the Father's throne. I have absolute confidence that all that I need is in Christ. So, would it hurt anything**



**if I didn't pray intercessory prayers for those I know are in need? Let me tell you, no one asks that question when he or she is in need. I've been in a situation of great need. I've been in a situation where my life, medically speaking, was very much on the line. I knew that the prayers of the faithful were important. I knew that my brothers and sisters in Christ praying for me were doing something that was important to my life. My ultimate faith and trust is in a sovereign God and the glorious Christ, but our faithfulness to Christ requires us to do what Christ commands, and that means to pray for the faithful. I know one reason it's important. I'm a much more faithful Christian when I'm praying for those I know are in need.**

**— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.**

And of course, we should also advocate on behalf of others for the matters of daily life. For example, just as we ask for bread for ourselves, we should also advocate for others, asking God to meet their daily needs too. We should ask him to grant all sorts of blessings to his people, including things like health, provision for work, and success in their relationships. Whenever situations in our own lives weigh on our hearts, we should appeal to God to help us. And in the same way, we should be moved to pray for the needs of others, whether those needs are big or small.

**People often wonder about the mystery of prayer. Why do we need to pray? If God already knows all things, and if Jesus is already interceding, why do we need to pray? Is anything missed, or does it hurt anything if we don't pray and intercede for the world and for others? Well I think the answer to the question is yes, something is hurt, and here's why. First of all, if we don't intercede, we are disobeying God, for God has commanded us to pray. On one level, that's all we need to know. We don't need to understand the mystery of how it works. God has commanded us to pray. And if we trust him and love him, we will pray. But secondly, God not only has commanded us to pray, but somehow in the mystery of all of this, he includes the prayers of the saints in the very intercession of Jesus. I'm struck by this image in the book of the Revelation in which there is this incense that burns and rises to God which is described as the prayers of the saints. It's as though if we don't pray, we also hurt our own relationship with God in that God wants us to be engaged with him in what he is doing in the world. So he calls us into a deeper and fuller relationship with him by seeing ourselves as his co-laborers, as Paul describes himself and others, co-laborers with God in this work of redemption through our intercession. So our relationship with God is hurt. But thirdly, here's the greatest mystery of all. Somehow God has decided to redeem the world not by acting on it from without, but the creating of power of his grace within. And so as we intercede with Jesus, it's not so much that we should think of ourselves as trying to**

**convince God to do something that he doesn't want to do, or try to add something to the prayers of Jesus. We ought to see our intercession for the world or for others more like this. We are trying to take the world or others and pull them by our prayers to the place where God wants them to be so his blessing and his grace can be poured out upon them. And so, yes, in God's mysterious design, something is lacking if we don't pray, because from within his creation, he has left his redeemed children to be not only those who are waiting on their final salvation, but working now, pulling and drawing by prayer, the world and others to the place where God can save them.**

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on Jesus the Priest, we've looked at the Old Testament background to Jesus office, seeing that God ordained priests to prepare and lead God's people into his special, holy presence in order that they would receive his blessing. We've also seen how Jesus fulfilled this office in the New Testament by becoming our Great High Priest. And we've considered some of the ways we can apply the principles of Jesus' priestly ministry to our lives in the modern world.

Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the biblical office of priest. As our Great High Priest, he is preparing us to live in God's holy presence, and to be blessed by God in astounding ways. And those blessings are not reserved entirely for the future. Through Jesus sacrifice and intercession, the Father is willing to give us a foretaste of our eternal life right now, in the present world. For this reason, followers of Christ should rejoice in Jesus' priestly ministry and long for the day when we will be welcomed into the special presence of God in the new heavens and new earth by Jesus himself. We should also rely on and benefit from Christ's present ministry as our Great High Priest, who even now is interceding for us in the courts of heaven.

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