

Portrait of Christ as Priest

When you hear the word “priest,” what do you think of? If you grew up in a Catholic Church which had a generous, godly priest, you might have a warm memory of someone who served God and his parish well. But because of the shocking headlines of sexual-abuse allegations and convictions, others of you might have very negative feelings attached to the word “priest.”

We come today to passages in the Bible that attach the word “priest” to Jesus Christ. What thoughts and feelings should we have about that? Well, again this week, we should remember the phrase regarding Jesus that we were introduced to in our first week. He is the “true and better” version of any human example of spiritual leader. So, just as we saw last week that He is the “true and better” prophet, this week we see that He is the “true and better” priest. In fact, He is the ultimate High Priest. So, let’s begin by seeing...

I. The Role of the High Priest in the Old Testament.

In the life of Israel in the Old Testament, the Temple or Tabernacle was central. When Israel was rescued from Egypt by God, they were directed by Him to camp in the desert in a very organized pattern. Each tribe had their prescribed place. And what was in the very center? The Tabernacle.

[Show photo of Israel’s encampment in the wilderness]

Is there a reason for this? Absolutely! This Tabernacle, and later the Temple in Jerusalem, offered something that no other religion on earth offered. It was a place where the all-powerful Creator God came and lived among His people. As many of you know, the Tabernacle and later the Temple had the same overall design. They both were divided into three parts: the outer court, open to common people; the Holy Place, which was part of the large tent open only to priests, and finally the Holy of Holies, a place closed to everyone except the High Priest who went in there only once a year. The Holy of Holies was where God existed on top of the Ark of the Covenant on a place called the Mercy Seat.

Now, the High Priest had authority to direct the work of all the other priests on a day to day basis but let me describe what happened on that day when the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies. First of all, let me say that the job of any of the priests was to serve as mediator between God and the people. Why did they need a mediator? Because the nature of God is so different from the nature of sinful human beings. God’s holy, sinless nature is so much more powerful, that if there weren’t a mediator, then we, as sinful people, would immediately die in His presence.

It’s like humans and radioactivity. Radiation has many benefits for humanity but we can’t be in close, extended, physical exposure to it without it doing us harm. Madame Curie, who received the Nobel Prize for her work in discovering the power of radiation, died an early death from her exposure to it. She was known to carry vials of radium around with her in her lab coat. She just didn’t know it was dangerous. Researchers today must wear protective gloves and clothing just to handle her research papers because they’re so highly radioactive. ¹

So, while God was present with His people by having His Spirit dwell in the Holy of Holies, only one person on earth was allowed into His physical presence – the High Priest and that was only once a year. And what happened on that day?

That day was the Day of Atonement. It's described in Leviticus 16. The High Priest came dressed not in his high-priestly robes of bright colors and jewelry. No, he was dressed in a simple linen coat, much like what the common man or Jesus wore every day. Then, first, he performed a sacrifice for sin outside in the courtyard; he gathered some of the blood and took that with him into the Holy of Holies. This meant that he disappeared from the sight of the public when he sprinkled blood on the Mercy Seat. After this, he removed his humble garment and put on his high-priestly robes and reappeared to the people.

And what exactly did all this accomplish? Lev. 16:30 explains it:

“For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins.” (Lev. 16:30)

This was the most important work of any High Priest of Israel. And remember, who created all this? Who commanded every detail of this ritual to happen? This was all commanded by God. So, are you beginning to see how this ritual of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement might be a portrait of Christ?

But let me fill in even more color to this portrait. After the Jews were settled in their land, they built a permanent Temple in Jerusalem. If we go back 1,000 years from the day the Temple was dedicated in Jerusalem or 600 years before Moses recorded the instructions from God as to how to celebrate the Day of Atonement, something else happened on this exact geographic spot that the Temple one day would be built upon. It was during the time of Abraham, whom we could rightly call the first “Jew.” And what was it that happened?

It was the first time that love is mentioned in the Bible. And it's not love between a man and a woman or the love of a mother for her child. It's not even a person's love for God. It's the love of a father for his son. God said to Abraham:

... “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” (Gen. 22:2)

There are some today, even some Christians, who side-step this story because they can't explain how a God of love could possibly ask a father to do such a thing. I mean, isn't this barbaric? How could this be real? This must be some kind of a mistake or some misreading of ancient texts. How could the God we know in the New Testament possibly command such a thing? Have you ever wondered that?

Don't dismiss this story too soon. Don't try to edit it, not even one word, until you see what I'm about to show you. First, where is this place, “Moriah”? It's mentioned only one other time in the Bible, which is 2 Chron. 3:1 where it is described as the site of Solomon's Temple. So, God was telling a father to take the son he loved and sacrifice him on the exact location where in the future the High Priest would offer a blood sacrifice on the Day of Atonement.

But there's more. When they got to the mountain, Abraham had his son carry the wood for the sacrifice on his back, up the hill. His Son asked his father: (Gen. 22:7b, 8a)

... “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” ...

What do we see? We see an obedient son willingly climbing the hill of sacrifice and we hear a loving father speak with faith that though it looks like the son will be lost, the father is confident that somehow, somehow a loving God will save his son from death.

And finally, who is this son? He is the seed of Abraham, which makes him a critical link in the lineage from the seed of Adam and Eve to the one who God promised would one day crush the head of Satan. So, if Isaac had been actually sacrificed, God would've had to somehow, bring him back to life in order for the prophecy of Gen. 3 to be fulfilled. And that is exactly what Abraham believed could happen. Listen to Heb. 11:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Heb. 11:17-19)

Do you see the fuller portrait yet? This is a portrait of Jesus: a much loved Son of the "true and better" Father, who would one day, in obedience to His Father, carry the means of his life sacrifice up the exact same hill in Jerusalem (Mount Calvary is just up the ridge line from where the Temple once stood) and though He WOULD give up His own life, He would find that His Father would raise Him back to life, not just for His own benefit, but for the benefit of all who believe that He is the only Son of God. For those with eyes to see, this story of Abraham and Isaac is not a dark story out of sync with the New Testament, but the very foundation of the one story of salvation fulfilled only in the "true and greater" Isaac.

Which leads us to the book of Hebrews where we see...

II. How Jesus Replaces the Position of High Priest Forever.

We don't have time to consider every little piece of evidence that the book of Hebrews provides to prove that Jesus is the "true and better" High Priest, but let's look at the big pieces. First of all, *Jesus, by becoming human, can identify with our struggles.* Heb. 5 points out that this was true of the human high priests:

For every high priest ... is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God ... He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. (Heb. 5:1-2)

Jesus knows your struggles with temptation and attempts by Satan to deceive you because He experienced the same weaknesses, except He didn't give in to sin. But He knows your and my situation, verse 8:

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. (Heb. 5:8)

Did you hear that? Jesus LEARNED obedience just as you and I have to learn it. You can talk to Jesus straight about your difficulties. He's been where you are. He knows the way out of the maze you're in.

Secondly, *Jesus didn't promote Himself to the position of High Priest. He was appointed.* The Jewish high priests didn't elect themselves. They were selected by God. Verse 5:

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, (which was God the Father!)

**"You are my Son,
today I have begotten you";
as he says also in another place,
"You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek." (Heb. 5:5-6)**

Now, what's the big deal about Melchizedek? Well, here's the deal – as Heb. 7 explains, Melchizedek was not in the bloodline of Aaron because he lived 600 years before Moses and Aaron. But in Genesis 14, he is described as a “priest of God Most High.” His name means “King of Righteousness.” Now, that's all we know about Melchizedek. He's not bound by law, he's not a High Priest by his bloodline, he's appointed by God to be a priest and we don't even know when he died. So, the writer of Hebrews sees in Melchizedek the traits of Jesus as our High Priest. Namely....

- Jesus isn't in the bloodline of Aaron. He's in the bloodline of Judah.
- Jesus isn't bound by the restrictions of the law, because he's not a sinner like all the priests in Aaron's line.
- Jesus is appointed by God directly, just as it appears Melchizedek was.
- Jesus doesn't just appear to live forever, he actually does live forever.

And much more than this, the writer of Hebrews describes the deeper meaning of Jesus' office of High Priest:

(Jesus) ... who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. (Heb. 7:16)
And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him ... (Heb. 5:9)

No Jewish High Priest could ever claim to be perfect, totally free of sin. That is why, before they went into the Holy of Holies each year with the blood of the sacrifice, they first had to offer a sacrifice for themselves, for their sin. Jesus never had to do that! His sacrifice on the cross was purely to atone for YOUR sin and MY sin. This is what we see, then, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We see the “true and better” actions of the eternal High Priest on the unrepeatable Day of Atonement, His crucifixion day. Look at the comparison one more time...

- 1- The Jewish High Priest took off his priestly garments and was clothed in a common robe. Jesus laid aside his position as Creator and humbled himself, being clothed in flesh.
- 2- The Jewish High Priest offered a sacrifice for sin outside the Tent. Jesus offered His own body as a sacrifice for sin outside the city walls.
- 3- The Jewish High Priest disappeared from public view and poured the blood sacrifice on the Mercy Seat in God's presence. Jesus disappeared into the grave and according to Hebrews 9 went into God's presence with the sacrifice of His own blood:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. (Heb. 9:11-12)

- 4- Finally, after the sin offering was offered, the Jewish High Priest was again arrayed in his glorious garments and reappeared to bless the waiting congregation with great joy.² And one day, our eternal High Priest Jesus will reappear for us, arrayed in the light of His glorious second coming! (Heb. 9:28)

... so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

The reality of the Jewish High Priest in the Old Testament is not unimportant or to be ignored. It's the imperfect preview of what was necessary in order for anyone to stand in the presence of a holy, loving God. We must be made perfect before we can stand in the presence of

perfection. Only a perfect High Priest can accomplish that for you. That's why Heb. 7 says... (Heb.7:22-25)

This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Have you accepted Jesus as your High Priest? Have you asked that His sacrifice might count for your sin, to cover it, to atone for it? It's the only way you'll be able to stand one day in the presence of a perfect God. But if you ask Him to become your High Priest today, then on that day when you see Him in His glorious robes, He'll greet you with a huge smile and a hug and He'll not speak of your sin. No, He'll say, "Welcome home, my precious one." Let's pray...

¹ www.biography.com/scientist/marie-curie

² I'm indebted to the teaching of Dr. Rick Bartosik, *The Gospel in the Old Testament* (Global Pastor's Institute – Pangasinan, Philippines, Nov. 2004)