

XI. Sacred People: Christ Our Great High Priest

August 13, 2017

Chapters 13 & 14

Purpose: To see the functions of the Old Testament priesthood fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Key Verses: ¹⁴Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

A. Priestly and Levitical Service

⁸And of Levi he said, “Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your godly one, whom you tested at Massah, with whom you quarreled at the waters of Meribah; ⁹who said of his father and mother, ‘I regard them not’; he disowned his brothers and ignored his children. **For they observed your word and kept [guarded] your covenant.** ¹⁰They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law; they shall put incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar. ¹¹Bless, O Lord, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; crush the loins of his adversaries, of those who hate him, that they rise not again” (Deuteronomy 33:8-11).

Longman: The poem explicitly acknowledges the Levites’ roles as guardians (Dt. 33:9). In this case, they are said to have guarded the covenant, which is the legal term that describes Israel’s relationship with God. This guardianship then is said to have involved the following elements: 1) teaching the law; 2) sacrifice; and 3) finding out God’s will for Israel. Implied in this list is a fourth element, protecting the sanctuary.

1. Teaching the Law

Longman: As the Deuteronomy passage indicates, it was the responsibility of the Levites to teach the people the law.... For these reasons, the Levites were scattered through the land.... They were given cities among the other tribes and were scattered like leaven throughout the promised land. This way they could be of service to God by providing instruction to all the people. They, of course, not only taught the law, but they applied it, e.g., Leviticus 13 (pp. 140-141).

Longman: The period of the Judges was a particularly evil period in Israel’s history, and the Levites are shown to have been at the bottom of the cesspool (cp. Jdg. 17-21). When the teachers of the law are corrupt, we see that the whole nation is affected. The priests were commissioned to teach the law. This way the people would obey God, not infringe on God’s holiness (p. 142).

2. Offering Sacrifice

Longman: Sacrificial offerings were necessitated by the sin of God’s people. Sin broke the covenant, rendered the people unclean, and accordingly was an assault on God’s holiness.... Sin and uncleanness threatened God’s holiness, and sacrifice was God’s means of restoring *shalom*

Lesson XI – Sacred People: Christ Our Great High Priest

in the camp. As we have seen, the priests in particular were responsible for administering the sacrifices. In this way, they protected God’s holiness (p. 143).

3. Discerning God’s Will

Longman: The high priest was entrusted with the means of asking God questions that would determine the actions of the people of God. The Urim and Thummin were a two-part device whereby the people of Israel could solicit guidance from God. In an important way, we should view this function of the priesthood as an extension of their teaching of the law. The law was an expression of God’s will for His people’s behavior. However, the law did not cover every occasion, and often when a question arose as to God’s will in a particular circumstance, the high priest would have recourse to the Urim and Thummin.

- a) We are not told what the Urim and Thummin looked like
- b) Placed in a pocket on the chestpiece attached to the linen ephod
- c) “Carried over Aaron’s heart when he goes into the LORD’s presence” (Ex. 28:30)
- d) Name is Hebrew for “Lights and Perfections”
- e) We are not told how the Urim and Thummin worked
 - (1) It seemed to answer specific questions with yes, no, or silence
 - (2) Numbers 27:21 indicates how it was used between Joshua and Eleazar the high priest

Longman: The relationship described here (in Num. 27:21) between Eleazar and Joshua characterized the intended relationship between the high priest and the political leader throughout the history of Israel. In this way, the priests functioned as protectors of God’s holiness, keeping Israel from falling into sin that would alienate them from their God (p. 145).

- f) Positive example: David in 1 Samuel 23
- g) Negative example: Joshua in Joshua 9:14

4. Guardians of the Sanctuary

Longman: Perhaps the most obvious way that the priests and Levites protected the holiness of God is that they were the ones through whom other Israelites had to pass in order to gain access to the Holy Place. We see this through the arrangement of the camp as described in Numbers 2. This chapter strikes most modern readers as tedious and is frequently passed over. On the contrary, the arrangement of the camp is a statement of profound theological significance. In the first place, note that the tabernacle was in the center of the camp with the tribes in their assigned locations around the tabernacle.... This central location was because God is the King, the divine warrior.... More pointedly, for our discussion, it was specifically the Levites who immediately surrounded the tabernacle, the place where the king’s personal troops, his bodyguards would have been. Any attack on the camp that tried to reach the king would encounter the most severe resistance (pp. 146-147).

5. The Nazirites: Lay Priests

- a) The Nazirite law allowed lay people to dedicate themselves in a priest-like way (Num. 6:1-21)

Lesson XI – Sacred People: Christ Our Great High Priest

- b) The term “Nazirite” comes from a verb that means “dedicate oneself to a god”
- c) The special requirements of Nazirites were similar to restrictions imposed upon priests
 - (1) No intoxicating drink or any fruit of the vine (Num. 6:3-4)
 - (2) Nazirites never cut their hair (Num. 6:5)
 - (3) Prohibition of contact with the dead (Num. 6:6-12)
- d) Nazirite vows were temporary (typically 30 days)
- e) Two well-known life-long Nazirites
 - (1) Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11) from the hill country of Ephraim
 - (2) Samson (Jdg. 13:4-14) of the tribe of Dan

B. Jesus, the Ultimate Priest

Longman: The book of Hebrews ... relates the wonderful message that Jesus is the ultimate High Priest, just as it connects Him to many other matters in Old Testament worship. Though we might expect Hebrews to proclaim the connection between Jesus and the Old Testament priesthood, we are not prepared for the particular shape of his argument. According to Hebrews 4:14-8:14, Jesus is a High Priest like no other. He is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (p. 152).

- 1. Who Was Melchizedek?
 - a) Genesis 14
 - (1) The story of Abraham’s battle against the four northern kings to rescue Lot
 - (2) Abraham meets the king of Sodom and the king of Salem after the battle
 - (a) Melchizedek was the “king of Salem” (i.e., Jerusalem), which means “King of Peace”
 - (b) His name means “King of Righteousness”
 - (c) He seemingly and notably appears out of nowhere
 - (3) Abraham recognized Melchizedek as a fellow worshipper, treated him as an authority figure with respect
 - (4) Abraham submitted to Melchizedek’s authority by receiving a blessing and then giving a tithe of the plunder
 - (5) Abraham’s approval and alliance with Melchizedek is contrasted with his treatment of the king of Sodom
 - b) Psalm 110

¹The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” ²The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies! ³Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours.

Lesson XI – Sacred People: Christ Our Great High Priest

⁴**The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:1-14).**

- (1) God is addressing the Israelite king David and his descendants
- (2) It is also a Messianic psalm
- (3) The royal coronation psalm is naturally applied to Christ as a descendant of David

2. Jesus, High Priest According to the Order of Melchizedek

Longman: The author [of Hebrews] exploits the ambiguities about the Old Testament figure [of Melchizedek] in order to make his important point concerning Christ as priest. He is an exalted priest—so exalted that he transcends the normal categories. He is so much better than Aaron, the priests, and the Levites that He is of a whole different order. It is not the purpose of the author of Hebrews to tell us more about the Old Testament figure Melchizedek, and he is clearly not saying that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. The author’s allusion to Melchizedek is his way ... of saying that Jesus is the priest par excellence (p. 155).

Longman: A priest is someone who brings the people before God. He also brings the people’s gifts to God. Aaron and his sons did that, and now Jesus does that as well. Hebrews further informs us that Jesus, just like human priests, experienced temptations. Since we all are tempted, the priests are one with us and can well represent who we are. However, it is precisely at this point that Hebrews points to the huge difference between Jesus and typical human priests. The priests were tempted and often fell into sin. Jesus was tempted, but never sinned. He is a sinless priest. This has monumental ramifications. Priests not only offered sacrifices for the people; they had to offer sacrifices for themselves as well.... Jesus, though does not have to offer sacrifices for His own sins. He has none. He exclusively represents *us* before God (p. 155).

Longman: Hebrews 7:3 comments that the priest-king of Salem was ‘without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.’ If we read this statement with modern lenses on, we will misunderstand it to say that Melchizedek was not born in a human way and is still alive. But if we put ourselves back into the ancient world that produced Hebrews, we will know that the author is speaking about Melchizedek as a literary figure. Nowhere is his birth or death recorded. He pops into the narrative in Genesis and pops right out again (p. 156).

Longman: The text is saying that Melchizedek was Abraham’s superior! Abraham was the father of the faith, but he submitted himself to Melchizedek. Again, according to first-century Jewish thinking, if Abraham bowed to Melchizedek in homage, so Levi his descendant, a product of his loins, so to speak, also showed his obeisance to Melchizedek (cp. Heb. 7:9-10) (pp.157-158).

Longman: The association between Christ and Melchizedek rather than Levi also helps the author of Hebrews explain one other well-known fact. An Aaronic priest was a descendant of Levi, while Jesus was from the royal tribe of Judah. Associated with this is the fact that Melchizedek was not only priest, but also king of Salem. There was a clear and important distinction between priests and kings in Israel (p. 158).

Longman: The remarkable teaching of the Bible is that Jesus provides all the resources we need for the worship of God. He is the place of worship, as well as the means and the mode of

Lesson XI – Sacred People: Christ Our Great High Priest

worship. Hebrews in particular tells us that Old Testament worship has been superseded, and priests like Aaron and his sons are no longer required.... The New Testament tells us that we are a “priesthood of priests” (1 Pe. 2:4-12, esp. 9), and that no one is holier than anyone else.... Christ is our one and only priest, who leads us into the very presence of God (pp. 158-159).

C. Christ Fulfills the Functions of the Priesthood

DSB: In chapter 13 of our text, Longman describes 4 main duties of the Levites/priests (from Dt. 33). Those are: 1) teaching the law; 2) offering sacrifices; 3) discerning God’s will; and 4) guarding God’s holiness. Somewhat surprisingly, Longman does not follow up on this point to demonstrate how Jesus fulfills all of these priestly duties. I will attempt to do so here.

1. Teaching the Law

Jesus is not only a teacher of the law, He is the very Word of God.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God.**
²He was in the beginning with God.... ¹⁴And **the Word became flesh and dwelt among us**, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-2, 14).

Throughout the gospels, Jesus is consistently called “Teacher,” e.g.: Mt. 8:19; 12:38; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36; Mk. 4:38; 5:35; 9:17; 10:20; 12:14; 14:14; Lk. 3:12; 7:40; 9:38; 10:25; 11:45; 19:39; 20:28; Jn. 1:38; 8:4; 13:13; 20:16; etc.

In the Sermon on the Mount, he is presented as the Lawgiver, the greater Moses who instructs the people.

²⁸And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,
²⁹**For he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes** (Matthew 7:28-29).

He is not only the author of the Law and the teacher of the Law, but He is ultimately the subject and object of the Law. This is His own testimony to the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, **he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself** (Luke 24:27).

In the New Covenant, Jesus pours out His Holy Spirit to help us understand the Law of God. We no longer need the Levites to teach us the word of God, because we now have direct access to God and a personal relationship with Him. The mediatorial function of the priesthood is no longer necessary. The New Covenant promises of Jeremiah 31:31-34 are thus fulfilled in Christ:

¹¹And **they shall not teach**, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ **for they shall all know me**, from the least of them to the greatest.
¹²For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8:11-12).

2. Offering Sacrifice

As we have previously seen, Jesus not only is the perfect once-and-for-all sacrifice for the atonement of sin, but he is the High Priest who offers up Himself on our behalf.

Lesson XI – Sacred People: Christ Our Great High Priest

¹¹But 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) ¹²**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....** ²⁴For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, **he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself** (Hebrews 9:11-12, 24-26).

Christ has sat down at the right hand of God. His priestly service of offering sacrifices is over, never to be repeated. The Old Testament priests had to continually offer sacrifices; they couldn't sit down because their work was never finished. The reason for this is that ultimately the blood of bulls and goats was insufficient to atone for the sins of human beings created in the image of God. Only the perfect blood of Jesus Christ is sufficient to atone for a man's sins. Even though Christ no longer offers sacrifice for sin, He still does the work of a priest in representing man before God. His intercessory work on our behalf is never finished:

²³The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵Consequently, 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** (Hebrews 7:23-25).

3. Discerning God's Will

Jesus always sought and followed God's will while on earth. For example, His prayer in the garden of Gethsemane before His betrayal and arrest is instructive:

⁴¹And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, ⁴²saying, **“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done”** (Luke 22:41-42).

Of course, as the pre-existent Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus is God and His will is the same as the Father's will. Indeed, the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, also knows and has that same will. As Christians, we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, who helps us pray according to the will of God:

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because **the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God** (Romans 8:26-27).

What is the will of God for us, and how can we discern that will today? Well, as Christians, in union with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are given clear instructions in His Word (Christ Himself). All of the Scripture is given to us so that we might know God's will. And some verses, such as the following, are quite straightforward:

³For this is **the will of God, your sanctification** (1 Thessalonians 4:3a).

Lesson XI – Sacred People: Christ Our Great High Priest

4. Guarding God’s Holiness

Finally, there is the picture of the Levites guarding the holiness of God and limiting the approach of the pagan or unclean into the holy ground of the sanctuary. How does Jesus guard God’s holiness? Well of course, He is Himself holy. He makes all those who are in union with Him holy as well, by sanctifying us:

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶**that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her** by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, **that she might be holy and without blemish** (Ephesians 5:25-27).

But there is a more fundamental way in which Jesus Christ guards the holiness of God. In the Old Covenant, the Levites were to prevent any unclean or unauthorized person from entering into the presence of God. The Levites gained this privilege when they exercised judgment on the idolaters in Exodus 32, thus fulfilling that function of guarding God’s holiness. Aaron’s son Phinehas demonstrated the same zeal in killing the adulterous couple at Peor in Numbers 25. Thus, we see that all those who approach God in an unclean manner are destroyed. Only those who are clean can approach. Jesus is the only way to approach God in a clean manner. All other man-made approaches to God are doomed to end in failure and death. Only through Jesus can one be made pure and fit to approach God:

⁹I am the door. **If anyone enters by me, he will be saved** and will go in and out and find pasture (John 10:9).

⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. **No one comes to the Father except through me**” (John 14:6).

¹¹This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹²**And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved** (Acts 4:11-12).

D. Selected Questions for Further Reflection

1. How does God’s holiness manifest itself in our world today? Who guards God’s holiness today?
2. What does it mean for a person to be holy?
3. It was the priest’s role to teach the people to law. Where do we learn of God’s will today?
4. Reflect on how Christ functions as a priest in your life.
5. How does Christ protect God’s holiness?

Next Week: Read Longman chapters 15 & 16