

VII

A MERCIFUL PRIEST

Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17).

Lately I have been asking around to see what people think of when they hear the word "priest." Today people invariably think of a Roman Catholic priest.

Even though people may have strong prejudices against the Roman Catholic Church, they generally consider Catholic priests to be kind, courteous, and understanding individuals. A merciful priest is not difficult for us to understand at all.

The situation was much different during the days of the law. Under the law the primary function of the priest involved killing.

The worshiper would bring his sacrifice to the priest to be killed. The priest would then take a knife and cut the victim's throat. One can well imagine that not every victim was cooperative and that large animals such as heifers and bulls could create some moments of real excitement.

THE SCHOOLMASTER

Once the victim was slain the priest would then take the blood and sprinkle it in the appropriate places. Next, he would have to concern himself with the disposal of the carcass.

The choice parts of the viscera over and on the entrails, the two kidneys and their fat, and the appendage to the liver were all consumed on the altar (Lev. 4:8-10). A part of the meat that remained was for the sustenance of the priest and the remainder of the meat and the carcass had to be disposed of by the priest.

On special occasions a great many sacrifices would be made. Solomon, for example, offered unto the Lord the sacrifice of 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (I Ki. 8:63).

Certainly it is no exaggeration to say that literally millions of innocent victims were dragged to the priests during the days of the law to be butchered.

Neither is it wrong to assume that people in that day became as attached to their animals as we do in our own day and age. How vividly I remember my grandfather's sorrow when he had to sell his team of horses, and my children's tears when their little dog was run over by a passing car.

Can you not see that people could easily come to fear the priest? When passover time came around and you took your precious lamb to Jerusalem to the priest, it created a far different emotion than going to visit a priest does today.

Sons of Levi

The Levites were the priestly tribe during the days of the law. Levi demonstrated something of his vicious nature when he displayed his vengeance upon the family of Shechem.

Shechem, you will recall, was the Hivite prince who fell madly in love with Levi's sister, Dinah, and forced himself upon her.

When he desired her in marriage the sons of Jacob refused the offer unless the Hivite men submitted to the rite of circumcision. The men consented.

On the third day after the surgery, however, when the men were so sore that they were incapable of defending themselves, Simeon and Levi came bodily into their camp and massacred every man, plundered everything, and even carried away the women and children as captives (Gen. 34).

A MERCIFUL PRIEST

It is also worthy of note that at the giving of the law the people who engaged in a shameful orgy were to be executed, and the Levites were to kill them.

And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him (Moses). And he said unto them. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses; and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men (Ex. 32:26-28).

The very idea of men killing "every man his brother . . . and companion . . . and friend" almost literally boggles the mind. However offensive this may be to modern man, it needs to be understood that this is the stuff that priests were made of during the period of law. I am not certain how you perceive him, but Levi appears to me to be a man with a vicious and vengeful nature.

Melchisedek

Centuries before the law was given, there was a priest in Jerusalem by the name of Melchisedek.

We have no record of his ancestors and no idea of what became of him. Consequently, he is said in the Scriptures to be "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life . . ." (Heb. 7:3).

As far as we know there was no blood upon the hands of Melchisedek. We have no record that he ever performed animal sacrifices.

More significant, however, is the fact that Abraham paid tithes to Melchisedek. Since Abraham was the progenitor of the Hebrew people, it is obvious that Melchisedek took precedence over a Hebrew priesthood.

If Jesus had been from the tribe of Levi and had become a priest according to the law, we would have good reason to fear him.

But the priesthood of Jesus transcends the whole concept of law. Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchisedek. This is stated in the 110th Psalm and is repeated in Hebrews 5,6, and 7.

With reference to the law, the Scriptures explicitly teach:

If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law) what further need was there that another

THE SCHOOLMASTER

priest should rise after the order of Melchisedek, and not be called after the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law. For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah, of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood (Heb. 7:11-14).

Mercy vs. Sacrifice

In order to properly understand the Scriptures, it is important to see the overall plan of God. The commands which God gave are not an end in themselves, they are a means to an end.

When you command your children to stand in the corner, you have a goal in mind beyond that immediate circumstance. The command you give is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end.

So also with the commands of God.

During the period of law people became so obsessed with their own salvation that they lost sight of ministering to others.

When I am bringing my sacrifice to the altar my major concern is with my own relationship with God. When I am extending mercy my major emphasis is for others.

Now, which does God want? Mercy? or Sacrifice?

The Scriptures are crystal clear:

For I desire mercy and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings (Hos. 6:6).

This is one of the passages quoted by Jesus to explain His conduct. God gave us the law and the law demanded certain sacrifices, but neither the law nor the sacrifices which it demanded were ends in themselves, they were only means to an end.

The law was a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Atonement *The Day of ~~Pentecost~~*

There can be little doubt that the high point of priestly function under the law of Moses came on the Day of Atonement. It was on this day that the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies with blood for himself and for the errors of the people.

A MERCIFUL PRIEST

The responsibilities of the High Priest on this holy day are given in Leviticus 16. They are as follows:

- He bathed.
- He dressed in holy garments of white linen.
- He offered or presented at the door of the tabernacle a bullock for a sin offering for himself and his house.
- He presented at the same place two goats for a sin offering for the congregation.
- He cast lots on the two goats for one of the goats was to be sacrificed and the other was to be let go in the wilderness.
- He sacrificed the bullock.
- He passed from the court, through the Holy Place, and into the Holy of Holies with a censer and incense, and filled the space with a cloud of smoke.
- He returned to the court for blood from the bullock and passed again within the veil to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat and seven times before it.
- He returned to the court and killed the goat upon whom the lot for sacrifice had fallen.
- For the third time he returned to the Holy of Holies and did the same with the goat's blood as he had done with the blood of the bullock.
- He purified the outer part of the tabernacle by the sprinkling of blood and placed some of it on the horns of the altar of incense (Ex. 30:10).
- He returned to the court and placed the blood of the bullock and goat upon the horns of the altar of burnt offerings and sprinkled it seven times.
- He offered to God the remaining goat, layed his hands upon it, and confessed the sins of the people.
- He consigned the goat to a man who was to take it to the border of the wilderness and release it.
- He bathed and changed his linen garments for the regular high priest's clothing.
- He sacrificed two rams as burnt offerings for himself and for the people.
- He burnt the fat of the sin offering upon the altar.
- He saw to it that the remainder of the sin offering should be burnt without the camp.

THE SCHOOLMASTER

It is obvious that the High Priest had a busy day. It became necessary for preparations for this Holy Day to begin seven days in advance in order for everything to be properly done. In later times the High Priest practiced all week long under the oversight of the elders and on the night before he was not permitted to sleep.

If there ever was a time, however, when the Jewish people could feel at peace with God, it was on the Day of Atonement. It was on this day that their High Priest was ministering in their behalf in the presence of God.

The problem was that this assurance was only for one day. Their High Priest was a human who was subject to death even during the time that he was ministering before God.

By comparison with the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ, we may almost say that there is no comparison.

The book of Hebrews puts it like this:

And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: But this man, because he continueth ever hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's; for this he did once when he offered up himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore (Heb. 7:23-28).

Tempted In All Points Like As We Are

I think everyone of us is embarrassed by unusual temptations. We face some bizzare situation which causes us to have unholy thoughts which we would not even confess to our closest friend.

What a comfort it is to know that Jesus understands. He actually had the same kind of temptation.

He was tempted in ALL POINTS like as we are.

The Scriptures put it like this:

For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15).

A MERCIFUL PRIEST

The next verse encourages us . . .

LET US THEREFORE COME BOLDLY UNTO THE THRONE OF GRACE THAT WE MAY OBTAIN MERCY, AND FIND GRACE TO HELP IN TIME OF NEED (Heb. 4:16).

Jesus understands. The only blood upon His hands was His own.

Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (Is. 53:4-6).

The priesthood of Aaron was woefully inadequate. It was never intended by God to be adequate. It was intended to be a schoolmaster to bring us unto the priesthood of Jesus Christ that we might be justified by faith.

The Year of Jubilee began upon the Day of Atonement. Because we have the everlasting ministry of an undying and merciful priest like Jesus, we can forever rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory . . . and it is the law which brings us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why would a professional butcher possibly be excluded from jury duty?
2. Why would mercy perhaps impede the work of a Hebrew priest?
3. Could you ever come to the place where you could kill your "companion, brother, or friend" (Ex. 32:26-28)?
4. Why did Jacob associate Simeon and Levi with instruments of cruelty (Gen. 49:5)?
5. How did God show the superiority of the Priesthood of Melchisedek (Heb. 7:)?
6. Why did God allow the priesthood of the Levites to end?
7. Was Jesus literally tempted in all points like as we are (Heb. 4:15)?

THE SCHOOLMASTER

8. The priesthood of Law lasted approximately 1,500 years. What proportion is this of recorded human history?
9. How does the priesthood of Melchisedek more accurately represent the reality of Christ's work than the Levitical priesthood?
10. Do we need to come into the presence of Christ with fear?