

Lesson 11: The Priesthood (1)

Read: Exodus 28:1-5, Leviticus 21:1-24

A priest is a *mediator* between God and man, a minister who performs procedures and ceremonies relating to the worship of God on behalf of a community of people. The official Aaronic priesthood was established by God's commands at the same time He gave Moses the instructions for the building of the tabernacle. The first priests chosen by God were Aaron – Moses' brother – and his four sons.

The high priest, a descendent of Aaron through the first-born son of each generation, was the spiritual leader of the people. He was a token of consecration and of God's special anointing. He carried upon himself the tremendous duty of entering the Holy of Holies to sprinkle blood upon the atonement cover on the Day of Atonement each year, seeking God's forgiveness of sins for the whole nation of Israel. If the high priest fell short of the holiness God required and did not fulfill his job, Israel's sins remained unforgiven until the next Day of Atonement.

Discussion:

1. Was the concept of a priest foreign to the Israelites when God instituted it? Why or why not?

No, the idea of a priest was not a foreign concept to the Israelites. Although no formal priesthood had been established for the Israelites, they had seen plenty of Egyptian priests serve and offer sacrifices to their pagan deities.

2. Why did the priests have to wear special clothing?

The clothing, made with as much detail and attention as the rest of the tabernacle, were to set high priest and priests apart as holy when ministering in God's presence. This is most clearly signified by the high priest's turban, which was engraved with "Holy to the Lord" (Exodus 28:36). This mark upon his forehead was a constant reminder that the high priest was a consecrated vessel for divine service. It signified that only he bore the holiness on the ground which the rest of Israel could be acceptable before God — thus, only the high priest could enter into the Holy of Holies for make atonement for the nation of Israel.

The priests' clothing covered their nakedness and sinful bodies before the eyes of the Lord. God said if they did not wear the holy garments, they could incur guilt and die. Another important function of the clothing was to give the priests "dignity and honor" or "glory and beauty" (Exodus 28:2, depending on the translation). This was a reflection of the holiness, beauty, glory and dignity of the Lord. In addition, each piece of clothing had special purposes, e.g. the breastplate and ephod signified that the high priest was bearing the 12 tribes of Israel before the

Lord. (These details are described in the rest of Exodus 28. Go into further detail if time allows.)

3. We read about some laws regarding the priesthood in Leviticus 21. What do these laws point to in regards to the priesthood? What does this say about the character of God? (Pay attention to v.8.)

The priests were consecrated, or set apart, from the rest of the people. They had to be clean, holy and perfect – no physical defects were allowed. (Recall also that any animal with a defect could not be offered as a sacrifice.) They had to avoid situations that could make them ceremonially unclean, like approaching a dead body. Through this process, God was teaching the people about His holiness. Because God is holy, holiness was required of the priests who daily came into contact with the God's dwelling place and came near His presence. God cannot look on uncleanness and sin. (For further information, see Leviticus 8 about the detailed consecration and sacrificial rituals that had to be performed before Aaron and his sons could assume the priestly office.)

4. What were some of the responsibilities of the priests? (See Leviticus 1:2-9, 13:2-3, 24:2-9, Numbers 10:8-9 for some examples.)

The priests' responsibilities included ministering in the tabernacle: slaughtering and offering the animal sacrifices at the brazen altar, keeping the incense burning at the golden altar, keeping the bread of the presence before the Lord, and trimming the wicks and filling the oil for the candles at the menorah. They also had other responsibilities, including teaching the law of God to the people, praying for guidance and interceding for Israel, declaring people ceremonially clean or unclean when they had certain diseases or bodily conditions, and blowing the silver trumpets to summon a gathering at the tabernacle or as an alarm during attacks by foreign nations.

5. We have read the story of Nabad's and Abihu's death previously in Leviticus 10:1-3. This tragic incident happened right after the consecration rituals that inducted Aaron and his sons as priests in the Lord's tabernacle. In light of the roles of priests, why did God strike Nabad and Abihu dead and what lesson can we learn from their mistake?

The two older sons of Aaron offered "unauthorized fire" or "strange fire" before God. Whatever their intentions were, that fire that they offered was contrary to God's commands. And God took that offense seriously, and even more so because they were consecrated priests. They died immediately, not leaving any sons to continue their office or lineage (Numbers 3:4). God's words had been made clear: No one was to trifle with His holiness, and any disobedience of His commands, especially in the holy tabernacle where He dwelled, could mean immediate physical death. Also, to serve as priests meant complete obedience and vigil at all times during their service to the Lord.

6. The concept of priesthood to the Israelites was not limited to the individuals who served in the tabernacle. Read Exodus 19:5-6. What does it mean for Israel to be a “holy nation” and “kingdom of priests”? What did this covenant mean to Israel?

God had chosen Israel from out of the nations to be consecrated as holy, just like the priests were. They were to serve in the duty of mediating between God and man. By being obedient to God's Law and remaining faithful to Him, Israel was to show all other nations who didn't know the Lord that He was the only true God. Israel was to make known His name to the rest of the world, and other nations would be drawn to worship the Lord as well. This covenant was a conditional one — only when they obeyed God would He bless them as His “treasured possession.” If they didn't, they would cease being a holy nation and kingdom of priests.

7. Read Isaiah 29:13 and Jeremiah 31:31-34. Did Israel succeed in her role as a kingdom of priests? What was the result?

No, they did not keep their end of the covenant. They were unfaithful to the Lord even though He was faithful to them. Although they kept the outward ceremonies of the tabernacle, they were sinful and an abomination in God's eyes. They did not keep themselves consecrated and holy, but allowed themselves to be seduced into inter-marriage with and worship of the idols of the neighboring pagan peoples. They did not obey God's commandments. They failed as mediators between God and men and they failed to make known the name of the Lord to the rest of the world. Instead, they brought shame to the name of the Lord.

The prophets warned the Israelites that because of their disobedience and because they broke their end of the covenant with God, they would cease being a “holy nation and kingdom of priests.” As judgment, God gave them into the hands of foreign nations, including the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medo-Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. However, God's promise of a new covenant and the coming of the Messiah were yet to be fulfilled.

Optional further reading: The tribe of Levi was commanded to help the priests in the care of the tabernacle and all its furnishings. The three clans of the Levites (male descendants of Gershon, Kohath and Merari) were assigned specific tasks and were responsible for carrying different components of the tabernacle during the Israelites' travels through the wilderness. For more information, read Numbers 1:47-54 and chapters 3-4, and 8:5-26.