

2. Too hot to handle (studies in Leviticus) - We have a Priest

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[0 : 00] Now let's have a moment of prayer together before we come to this passage. God our Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, we pray that your Holy Spirit will shed a flood of light on these words that we have read.

Much of it seems remote, much of it seems obscure, and yet we believe that it is your word given to make us wise for salvation, given to lead us to the Lord Christ himself.

And so we pray that in his name you will open our eyes to behold wonderful things out of your law. Amen. We have a priest is the title for this evening.

Remember in my time in Durham, every June, when I used to walk down the ancient cobbled streets beside the cathedral, going to the college where I worked, the streets would be full of what smartly dressed people.

And I would often pass many of them, not realizing I knew them, because I had seen them over the past three years or so in church every Sunday, but I'd only ever seen them in the student uniform of jeans and sweatshirts.

[1 : 22] Here were all those young men with smart suits, all those young women with pretty dresses. Then when you saw all these parents bursting with pride, and sometimes younger brothers or sisters looking half embarrassed and half defiant, and they're glad rags as well, you realized it was graduation day.

Everyone was making a special effort to turn out as well-dressed as possible. And that is characteristic, isn't it, of ceremonies like that, graduations, weddings, the state opening of parliament, that sort of thing.

And what we have here in chapter 8 of Leviticus is just such an occasion, full of color, full of ceremony, full of pageantry, full of symbolism.

Because this is the ordination of the high priest Aaron and his sons, and not just his immediate sons, this is going to continue down the generations, as Aaron and his sons are ordained to the priesthood.

Now why did they need these people? Now in chapters 1 to 7, we saw, or particularly in chapter 1 this morning, that sacrifices were the way back to the holiness of God.

[2 : 34] An unholy people could not approach a holy God without blood, without sacrifice. Now in order for these sacrifices to be performed properly, as Paul says, done decently and in order, there needed to be special people set aside.

And God chose Aaron, the brother of Moses, and his sons ever after to be such people. How do we sustain that relationship with God?

And God gives his people priests in a ceremony that lasted for a week. Now you may say, oh that's all done very well, but this is an ancient ritual. What on earth is it saying to us in the 21st century?

Alright, it's got color, it's got pageant, it's got symbolism, it's got all the rest of it. But what is it saying to us? If you read the commentators on this chapter, you'll probably be very disappointed, because they spend most of their time telling us what kind of oil it was, telling us biology about the rams and the bullocks and so on.

Now that's not very helpful for us living the Christian life today. So what is it saying to us? Now the first thing it's saying to us is that God chooses certain people to represent him to others and others to him.

[3 : 55] That's what a priest is. A priest is someone who represents God to people and people to God. Now it is very important to realize this straight away, that all of Israel had a priestly function.

Exodus 19, Moses says, Israel is called to be a kingdom of priests. Now that's very important. Even in the Old Testament times, the whole of the nation has a priestly function to represent God to people and people to God.

And Peter repeats these words in 1 Peter 2 verse 5 when he says to the church, we are called to be a kingdom of priests, to offer sacrifices.

In other words, all of us are called to bring Christ to others and others to Christ. Wesley's words with which he summed up his ministry, I offered Christ to them.

That's essentially what priests are there to do. Now, this doesn't mean that pastors and teachers are priests in a technical sense, but they have the task of focusing the worship and equipping the people of God for their works of ministry.

[5 : 11] That's what Paul says in the letter to the Ephesians. People are called to be pastors and teachers to equip God's people for their works of ministry. But the important, the really important thing about this chapter, and we misunderstand it, we're simply seeing it as about the ordination of leaders in the church of God.

It does have applications there, but it is about the ministry of all the people of God because all the people of God have a priestly ministry in the great high priest.

There is a priest. We have a priest. Interesting, the early church were often called atheists by the pagan writers. They were called atheists because they seemed to have nothing that a religion needed.

They didn't have a temple, they didn't have an altar, they didn't have priests, they didn't have rituals. And therefore the pagan writers called them atheists. Interesting, in the 17th century, when King Charles I sent Archbishop Laud up to Scotland to try to impose his particular ritual, that Laud wrote back to King Charles, Your Majesty, the benighted people, appear to have no religion because they didn't have all the color and light and pageantry that he thought was necessary.

See, that's why the author of Hebrews says, but we have all these things. We have an altar. We have a sacrifice. And above all, we have a great high priest who has gone into heaven.

[6 : 40] So with that in mind, let's look at the chapter. I've got three S's for you. First of all, symbolism in verses 1 to 13. The thing magic about alliteration, it just sometimes helps to fasten things in people's minds, as long as it's not too elaborate and not too contrived.

We have symbolism in verses 1 to 13. We have sacrifices in verses 14 to 36. And we have sanctifying, making holy, in verses 30 to 36.

So that's the way we'll look at this chapter. First of all, the symbols that are used. Now these symbols are not chosen at random. They are chosen because the Lord commanded them.

Eleven times in the chapter, we are told the Lord commanded. All of these are controlled by the Word of God. It is the Word of God that makes people into priests, makes people into people of God.

Who was about to be ordained as high priest? Now you read back in Exodus 32, and you'll find it is Aaron, the brother of Moses, who cut such an inglorious figure and bowed to the pressure to make a golden calf, which was then said to be the image of the God who brought them up out of Egypt.

[8 : 05] That was the man who was going to be ordained, the high priest. And he's now graciously restored. God uses fallible people, obviously.

Otherwise, no one could ever be used by God. See, many people say, I have to wait until I'm ready for God to use me. No, you're never going to be ready.

That's the good... I mean, let's be honest, we're not up to it. But the good news is, because we're not up to it, God himself has provided a way in which we can.

He's given us a great high priest. So these symbols are showing us something of what it means to be set apart for God. You'll notice the whole of Israel, the whole of the congregation, verse 4.

Verse 3, first of all, assemble all the congregation, and Moses did as the Lord commanded, and the congregation assembled. This is a public act. And there are three particular symbols.

[9 : 03] First of all, there is water. Verse 6, Moses brought Aaron and his sons and washed them with water. Christ needed no cleansing.

But in order to identify with us, he went through baptism so that he would identify with us even at that moment. But Aaron needs to be cleansed, his sons need to be cleansed, and the furniture of the tent needs to be cleansed as well.

In other words, only clean and forgiven people can act as priests before God and to the world. As I said, that doesn't mean perfect to people.

You may have seen the fridge magnet. Christians are not perfect. They are forgiven. That's the important thing to remember. Because if we remember we are forgiven, then we remember that it's not us.

And literal water here becomes a symbolism of purity and the removal of stains, the washing away of filth and dirt, literally, but symbolizing the washing away of all impurity.

[10:08] Now, in verses 7 to 10, the next symbolism is clothes. In verses 6 to 10, Moses brought Ernie's sons, washed them with water, and put the coat on him and tied it and so on.

And these are splendid and colorful robes. It must have been a most impressive sight and a most impressive pageantry. And on these were the so-called, verse 8, the Urim and Thummim.

Now, these were basically two flat stones which acted as lots. They had a yes and a no side.

Now, you may say, what on earth is this? Is this God using magic, deciding things by the casting of lots? Yes. There's an important verse in Proverbs that says this, the lot falls where it wills, but the decision is in the hands of the Lord.

Anything, even apparently as trivial as the casting of a dice, if it's overruled by God, can declare his will. It's not saying, of course, that we decide, oh, you need a new minister, let's cast a coin.

[11:16] If it's heads, it's so-and-so. If it's tails, it's so-and-so. That would be a total misrepresentation. It's saying that God graciously chose to use this method. As I said this morning, I've got a whole collection of visual aids showing how God's guidance, God's care, extends to the remotest details of life.

If you're here next Sunday morning, we'll see how that goes even further in the details of everyday life. Now, the important thing about clothes is this.

They were robed gorgeously. And the psalmist says in Psalm 93, the Lord is robed in majesty.

Isaiah 61 talks about God clothed with the garments of salvation.

Because clothes in Scripture are often a symbol of the inward condition. The great Augustine, Saint Augustine, was converted as he heard the words, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

That really sums it all up. Paul tells us to put on the whole armor of God, to be clothed with kindness and gentleness, but also put on the Lord Jesus Christ. It has nothing whatever to do with ministers wearing robes.

[12:29] As Phil Jensen said in one of his more provocative asides, Christ didn't die so that men could dress up in frocks and flounce around the floors of old buildings. This is not what this passage is about.

This passage is about the church representing God to the world, clothed in the garments of salvation. In one of the choruses, in royal robes, I don't deserve.

I live to praise your majesty. Clothed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne. So the symbolism of water, of cleansing.

The symbolism of clothes, which means that the inner character of God is manifested. And then there is the anointing oil, verse 10.

Moses took the anointing oil, he consecrated the tabernacle and the altar, and then he poured the anointing oil on Aaron's head. Now oil is a symbol of the spirit.

[13:28] In 1 Samuel 16, Samuel anoints David as the king of Israel. And here, Moses ordains the first high priest. I said this morning that Moses' authority in the Old Testament is supreme.

And here it is. There is, he ordains the first high priest. Later on, the high priest would ordain his successors. But it's Moses who does this. Now in the New Testament, the spirit is given to all believers.

The spirit is a gift from the risen Lord to all believers. But obviously, certain people are given particular gifts to lead the people of God, to teach the people of God.

When we remember this, when we remember that any gift given, particularly a gift of leadership, a gift of teaching and preaching, is a gift of the spirit, that will rescue us from two dangers.

One of idolizing leaders, of treating them as if they were not human, of putting them on a pedestal which no frail mortal can possibly stand being put on.

[14:34] Leaders are like everyone else. And they're like what Shylock says in The Merchant of Venice. If you prick us, do we not bleed? And so on. Leaders are flesh and blood like everybody else. They're not to be idolized.

But also, they're not to be vilified. The opposite extreme. Because both of these lead to deadness and to spiritual decay. When God's gracious spirit gives gifts to people, it needs to be recognized. It's not the person we thank God for. It's the gifts we thank God for. But the greatest gift of all is the spirit himself. It's one of the hymns that says, crowning gift of resurrection, sent from your ascended throne, fullness of the very Godhead, come to make your life our own.

All Christians are given the spirit. And some Christians are given the spirit in gifts of leadership, in gifts of teaching, and so on. And others have given other gifts. But see how all these come perfectly in Jesus himself.

Before he was born, Gabriel said to Mary, the highest will overshadow you. And the word used there is the word that's used of the spirit hovering over the chaos waters at creation.

[15:49] It's the word that's used of the glory of God on the ark of the covenant. In other words, as Mary gives birth to this child, it is the spirit himself who is superintending the process.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus, when he is baptized, the spirit descends like a dove. And then, when he ascends to heaven, he gives the spirit.

And it's interesting, here's the end of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus' last act on earth before he ascends is an act of blessing. Like the great high priest, he lifts up his hands and blesses them.

That's the last act before he goes into heaven to continue that work. That's the symbolism. Now, the sacrifices, verses 14 to 36.

The work of Christ as the great high priest, presenting these sacrifices. First of all, in verses 14 to 17, there is the sin offering or the purification offering.

[16:52] That's described back in chapter 4. Now, in this offering, the burnt offering was wholly consumed on the altar to show that it was all given to God and to show symbolically the presenting of the worshipper to God as a living sacrifice.

In this, the fat and the entrails were burned on the altar, symbolizing the removal of pollution. And its remains were burned outside the sacred enclosure.

Now, Hebrews 13 tells us that Christ died outside the sacred enclosure. No longer is there need to come to a special place. No longer is there need for a special ritual.

Because since Christ has died outside the sacred enclosure, all the world can come to him. And all the world can meet him. Then we have the burnt offering, verses 18 to 21.

That's the offering we looked at this morning. It was a total consecration to God. Nothing held back. God has given himself and we give ourselves.

[17:57] And once again, let me emphasize, it's a gift of grace. God gives the inner desire and God gives the sacrifice. And then for this special occasion, there is verses 18, the ram of the burnt offering.

Sorry, verse 22, the ram of ordination. Now, this is very likely what's called the peace offering or the fellowship offering in chapter 3.

Sometimes also called the wave offering from verse 27. He put all these in the hands of Aaron, in the hands of his sons, and waved them, held them up before the Lord, holding up hands to receive God's blessing in order to transfer that blessing to others.

And as part of that ritual, the priests have blood sprinkled on their ears, on their toes, and so on, to symbolize they are wholly set apart for God. Now, these are acted parables, aren't they?

These sacrifices. The one perfect sacrifice happened once and cannot be repeated. The blood that was shed at Calvary, which cleanses the sins of the world, that blood that flowed for sin and for unrighteousness.

[19:12] It's a wonderful passage in one of C.S. Lewis' science fiction novels where one of the characters for the first time encounters blood. And in these novels, God is given the name of Mal Eldil.

And this character with trembling says, is this the substance with which Mal Eldil redeemed the worlds, coming across the blood that flowed at Calvary, which, as we know, redeems not only fallen men and women, but will one day redeem the whole universe back to God.

So we have the symbols, we have the sacrifices, then we have what I've called the sanctifying. I'm less happy with this third S than with the other two, but if you think of a better one, let me know afterwards.

It's not that it's wrong, because it is about the priests being made holy. Now is the time after this for reflection on the significance of what had happened.

They needed time to reflect on what had happened, and they needed time to prepare for what was to come. Remember in the Gospel so often Jesus takes his disciples aside and says, come and rest.

[20 : 25] You know, in the Evangelical Church we are so activist. We always have to be doing things. We never have time to reflect. We never have time to sit back and ponder.

The point says we have no time to stand and stare. We need to have times when we withdraw from the activism and when we receive the grace of God. And you know one thing I've discovered, that the Kingdom of God can survive without me.

And I think we all need to discover that. Sometimes we talk and think as if I withdrew from the battle for a little while. The Kingdom could not come.

Remember, it's all of grace. There needs to be time for reflection. And there are two things about this. First of all, there is fellowship. Verse 32, what remains of the flesh?

Sorry, verse 31, boil the flesh and there eat it and the bread that is in the basket of the ordination offerings. Now this is literal feeding. They've had a stressful time, a very tense time one can imagine.

[21 : 31] And Jesus, who is totally aware of all our human needs, realizes what they need now is a meal. This is so characteristic of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When he raised Jairus' daughter, read about it in Mark and in Matthew and Luke, he said, give us something to eat. Not go away and have a prayer meeting. Give us something to eat.

Jesus is so aware of our human frailties and our human needs. He knows they needed to share a meal. He knows they needed, as they participate in this vital work, they needed to come together eating this fellowship meal.

And this is what he provides for. But also, there is obedience. There is fellowship, but there is obedience. Verse 33, You shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting for seven days until the days of your ordination are completed, for it will take seven days to ordain you.

Immediately, we hear seven days. Of course, we are back in the world of Genesis 1 and 2, aren't we? This is a work of creation. This is a work of new creation.

[22 : 38] God is calling these people into his service so that through them, he can win back the world. So that through them, he can continue his work of new creation.

And that's why they have to spend time. These will reign day and night for seven days. You know, it will have fell. That's an awfully long time. But they obeyed what was done. And we read in chapter 10, not a chapter we'll have time to look at, but read it, how Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, were destroyed for disobeying the word of the Lord and thinking that they knew better.

If you read that chapter, says they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord. And almost certainly, what that means is they thought, oh, let's introduce some of the old Egyptian worship that we used to enjoy in Egypt.

Let's introduce something that's more interesting than what the Lord has said. See, they needed to be sanctified, and we do. Conversion is the work of a moment.

Conversion is something that happens instantaneously, but sanctifying, making holy, becoming like Christ is a long-term process.

[23 : 50] And that symbolizes what happens here because it is a process of creation. You see, if we go back to the beginning of the Bible, it's all there, isn't it? In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

That is the moment of creation. But the process takes much longer because God creates by his life and then he continues to create. I believe we'll continue to do so through all eternity in the new creation as he continues to unfold the wonders of his love.

We have a priest. Because we have a priest, we can worship. Fickle, sinful, messed up as we are. We are welcome in the presence of God and no one can turn us away.

Because we have a high priest, we can go on in the Christian life knowing that however often we fail, that he will not fail us. And because we have a great high priest, let's praise God, let's thank God for him and let's continue in our Christian living and in our worship with confidence and thanksgiving.

Let's pray. God our Father, we know how weak we are.

[25 : 05] we know how fickle we are. We know how temperamental we are and how we get things out of proportion and how we make mistakes and sometimes deliberately go our own way.

But we praise you that you have provided for us not only a sacrifice, you have provided for us a priest, one who stands in for us, one who presents our prayers to God, one who loves us, and one who will one day present us faultless before the presence of his glory with shouts of joy.
Amen.