

Jesus our Priest

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn in our Bibles to the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 10, and I'd like to read the first 14 verses. If you have our visitor's Bible, it's on page 1006, 1006.

So the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 10, beginning at the first verse. For since the law, that's the law of Moses, the Old Testament law, since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come, instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sin. But in these sacrifices, the old covenant sacrifices, there is a reminder of sin every year, for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me. In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book. When he said above, You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings, these are offered according to the law, then he added, Behold, I have come to do your will.

[1 : 51] He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And by that will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.

For by a single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. Well, this is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord indeed make it a blessing to us.

Now, I don't know what the idea of the priesthood of Christ conjures up in your minds as you begin to think of it. Possibly strange thoughts. You might think of priests as wearing saffron robes in the Far East, or maybe the priests of Burma, Myanmar, that we saw on the television a year or so ago, wearing their long brown robes.

All seems rather strange. Or you might think, if you've seen a certain number of Irish films and read certain Irish novels, you might think of the old-fashioned Roman Catholic Irish priest, who's a pretty severe character, isn't he?

[3 : 17] With a face like granite and a short haircut, a big man. Not all Irish Catholic priests, I'm sure, are like that, but that can be a stereotype of them. And again, we might think that that's a rather odd feeling.

But even if our thoughts about priesthood initially make us think that it's a strange thing for us to get our minds around, once we learn what the Bible teaches about the priesthood of Jesus Christ, there is great blessing and great understanding for us.

And that's what I want us to investigate this afternoon, to see how his priesthood is the fulfilment, indeed it brings to an end, the whole business of the Old Testament priesthood.

So I want to ask what priesthood means in the Bible and why it's so important. Now in the epistle to the Hebrews, the priesthood of Jesus is one of the central themes of the letter.

I think it's first mentioned back in chapter 2, verse 17, where the writer says, therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, this is Jesus of course, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.

[4 : 24] And then we have another mention in verse 1 of chapter 3, that he is the apostle, interesting word to use of Jesus, but he's the apostle and high priest of our confession. And then in chapter 4, when we get to chapter 4, verse 14, the writer launches into this great section, which runs right the way through to the end of chapter 10, which is all about the priesthood of Jesus and what it has achieved.

So the priesthood of Jesus is the dominant theme in the epistle to the Hebrews for the next six or seven chapters. Now let me, before we look at chapter 10, say a little bit about the main features of the Jewish priesthood in the Old Testament.

The function of the priest was really twofold. First, to offer sacrifice to the Lord God on behalf of the people, and secondly, to teach the law of Moses. So he was therefore a sacrificial official, you might say, but also a teacher of the law.

But his main function is to be a go-between, to be a mediator between man and God. And we might want to ask, why is a go-between necessary?

Are God and his people not on friendly terms? Can't they just talk to each other directly? Why does somebody need, as it were, to shuttle between the two? Now those are good questions, and the answer to them begins in Genesis chapter 3 with the story of Adam and Eve.

[5 : 45] When Adam rebelled, and Eve rebelled against God, his response to their rebellion was not to say, I forgive you. His response was to expel them forthwith from the Garden of Eden, and to bar them from re-entering his presence.

In other words, Adam and Eve's rebellion against God was so repugnant to God's holy love that fellowship between them and him was now impossible. It was breached catastrophically.

And we sometimes picture Adam and Eve dressed in their goat skins, trudging away from the locked gates of the Garden of Eden, their heads bowed in shame, walking through thorns and thistles to the land of decay, the valley of the shadow of death.

Is it possible that fellowship with God could ever be restored? Now, we're bound to ask, why did God treat Adam and Eve so severely?

Why didn't he just forgive them in the way that the father lavishly and fully forgave the prodigal son? You remember the story of the prodigal son, Luke chapter 15? The father welcomes him straight back, full forgiveness, just like that.

[6 : 53] So we might say, why didn't God behave like that with Adam and Eve? But if we look at it like that, the mistake we make is to assume that our relationship with each other is the same kind of thing as God's relationship with mankind, which it's not.

When we say to each other, as we sometimes do, I forgive you, we're relating to each other in a different way from the way that God relates to human beings. When we sin against each other and hurt each other, we're hurting each other in the sense of committing personal injuries against each other.

But God is not a private individual and human sin against him is much more than a personal injury. So the reason why God had to treat Adam and Eve so severely is twofold.

First, it is because of the seriousness of sin and secondly, because of the majesty of God. Think of the seriousness of sin. Adam and Eve's rebellion against God was a very different thing from the kind of petty injuries that we inflict upon each other.

Their rebellion was a defiance of their loving creator. It was a unilateral declaration of independence. In breaking God's law and submitting to the will of the serpent, they were moving house, lock, stock and barrel, from the realm of God's rule, his kingly rule, to the realm of self-rule and the rule of the devil.

[8 : 17] So they were taking the crown from God's head and putting it on their own head. Their rebellion was ultimately serious because it was denying God his rightful kingly position.

But secondly, we must remember too the majesty of God. When we hurt each other, we're hurting flawed and sinful creatures like ourselves. But in rebelling against God, mankind has shaken its fist in the face of kingly majesty.

So when we forgive one another with those three familiar words, I forgive you, we're operating on a different plane from the plane of God's relationship to mankind.

In dealing with each other, we're dealing with things like jealousy and vanity and pride and one-upmanship. But in mankind relating to God, we are dealing with defiant rebellion in the face of holy majesty.

Of course, as the Lord God locked the gates of the Garden of Eden and set angels there with flaming swords to prevent the man and woman returning, it wasn't as though he did not know what he was going to do next.

[9 : 28] Of course, God knew what he would do. He knew that though paradise was lost, paradise would eventually be regained. The Lord loved the rebel race so passionately that he was determined to provide a way of forgiveness.

But only he knew just how much it would cost him. Now let's trace historically what happened after Genesis chapter 3, remembering all the time that fellowship between God and man has been ruptured by mankind's rebellion.

Well, the story of the Bible after Genesis 3 is the story of the Lord God wonderfully, sovereignly putting things right. The first thing he did was to choose a people within the human race.

So he started with Adam's third son, Seth. And from Seth, the line of choice or election is traced in Genesis through Noah, then down to Abraham.

The people of Israel is constituted. We then have Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's 12 sons. They go to Egypt. They spend 400 years and more there. They're enslaved by Pharaoh and the Egyptians and they're in great trouble.

[10 : 37] And then, as you know, they are spectacularly rescued by God at the Red Sea and are brought to Mount Sinai where the Lord gives to Moses the law. And think of this whole body of Old Testament law which Moses receives.

At the heart of it is God's provision of a priesthood. So the priests, they're drawn from just one of the 12 tribes, the tribe of Levi, and their job is to act as intermediaries between the people of God and God himself.

Now remember, fellowship between man and God has been ruptured by man's rebellion. So the relationship that we see between God and the people of Israel is not the same thing as the fellowship enjoyed with God by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the rebellion.

There is a relationship between God and Old Testament Israel, but it's a painful and difficult relationship characterized for the most part not by glad obedience but by continued rebellion.

You think of the 40 years wandering in the wilderness. It's one scene of rebellion after another, difficulty and grumbling. But if I can put it like this, God with great patience, God is more patient than we are, God with great patience was working on the problem of forgiveness.

[11 : 55] And through the work of the priesthood, he was preparing the Israelites for the eventual arrival of a full, complete forgiveness. Now the role of the priests as intermediaries was to offer sacrifices.

So the people of Israel would choose their animals, they'd bring the animals live to the priest, the priest would slaughter the animal, take the blood and sprinkle it or pour it following the rituals described in the book of Leviticus.

Now those rituals are quite complex, a bit hard to follow, but their purpose in Leviticus is clear. They're given by God to symbolise forgiveness and atonement.

And the blood that has to be shed and then sprinkled or daubed is right at the heart of the whole business. There has to be shed blood. Indeed Hebrews says without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Now we might want to ask why was blood necessary? It's a good thing we don't have to have blood today in our Christian worship and services.

[12 : 59] Imagine what health and safety would say if there was blood all over the floor here. I'm sure that the church leaders would find it a difficult business mopping up, wouldn't they? So why was blood necessary? We might even think that blood has some sort of magical powers.

I remember when I was about 10 or 11 years old at school, I was part of a little gang of boys. There were four or five of us. We called ourselves the X gang. Very original title, wasn't it? And I remember on one occasion we decided to become blood brothers.

So we took a pen knife or some sharp instrument, made a little nick, not a serious injury, but just a little nick in our thumb or finger, just enough to squeeze a drop or two of blood out. And then having got the blood out, we rubbed it together and we said to each other, we're blood brothers now.

Death to the weeds of the lower fourth. That's what we said. I think the lower fourth actually survived our threats, but the idea was that mixing your blood together somehow bound you together in a magical kind of bond.

Now there is no magic in the blood of the Old Testament sacrifices. There's no magic in the biblical faith full stop. The blood had to be shed to demonstrate that a life had been forfeit, a life had been laid down.

[14 : 14] Our sin is so serious in God's sight that it has to be punished by death. That is God's ruling, if you like. The wages of sin is death, as Paul puts it in Romans chapter 6.

But the wonder of God's way of dealing with our sin is that in the Old Testament, he provides a sacrificial animal to die in place of the worshipper.

So the worshipper deserves to die because of his sin, but God accepts the death of the goat or the lamb as a substitute. So the lamb dies and the worshipper is released and can go free.

Now of course, you know where we're heading. We're heading straight to the cross of Calvary, eventually. But before we go forward in history to Jesus and his death, it's good to remember that the rituals of the book of Leviticus are not actually the beginning of this line of teaching in the Bible.

We can go back in history, first to the Passover, where the lamb was slaughtered and its blood was sprinkled on the Israelites' door frames and that lamb again was a substitute for the firstborn son of the Israelite family.

[15 : 21] And we can go still further back in the Old Testament to Genesis chapter 22, to that terrible story where the Lord calls upon Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice.

But you remember at the last minute, the Lord God provides a substitute for Isaac. There's the lamb caught by its horns or a ram caught by its horns in a bush and that's offered instead of, in place of, as a substitute for the son.

So even before we reach Leviticus, we see that God's way of forgiving and sparing his beloved but rebellious people is by providing a sacrificial lamb to die in their place.

Now looking to Hebrews and Hebrews 10, we'll get into one or two verses in just a moment. To understand Hebrews, we need to grasp that it's all, that the whole of Hebrews turns upon a great contrast.

So in Hebrews, the Old Testament and all its provisions is being contrasted with Jesus. So when I say the Old Testament provisions, I mean the priesthood, the sacrifices, the temple, the shedding of blood.

[16 : 27] All these things were not a failure. After all, it was the Lord God who had provided them. But they were insufficient. This is what Hebrews teaches. They were insufficient to bring about real, full forgiveness.

Let me use a simple illustration to try and explain this point about the insufficiency of the old sacrificial system. We have a room in our house called the playroom.

My two youngest children are now 10 and 13 so they're beginning to grow up. But a few years ago we used to love playing shop together. And as a Christmas present, one of my little girls was given a toy Tesco's.

You know, whole Tesco's. All the shelves and the shopping and the trolleys and plastic money and all the food. The stuff we've got. We've got tins of beans, packets of tea and coffee and biscuits, vegetables, bright yellow corn cobs, tomatoes, apples, pears, peppers, potatoes, sausages, pieces of steak, loaves of bread.

And I used to play at shopping and being the Tesco shopper with the children and one of the children, you see, would act as the checkout girl at the till. So I'd have to go around the shelves and load up my little trolley with all the stuff and then I would present myself for payment at the till and we'd go through the items.

[17 : 44] Three potatoes, that's 25 pence please, Mr. Lobb. One tin of baked beans, that'll be £4.50. £4.50 for a tin of beans? What planet are we living on?

And so the thing went on, you can imagine the procedure. Now just think of it, that toy shop with its toy money and toy tins and toy vegetables has a real value.

It's fun to play with, especially if you're a little child, but it has an educational value because it's helping to prepare a child for real money and real groceries and real shops.

It has a real relationship to the real thing. It's not the real thing, but it helps to prepare you for the real thing. Now in the same way, the Old Testament priesthood and sacrifices were not the real and final thing.

They were preparatory. They were educational. They had a real relationship to the real thing, but they could not actually provide the profound forgiveness that mankind needed.

[18 : 49] And that's why our author says here in chapter 10 verse 1, The law, the law of Moses and all its provisions, is only a shadow of the good things to come.

It's not the true form of these realities. And because it is only a shadow, it can never, by these same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near.

You almost sense the tedium, don't you, in the very words there. It can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. So that little passage is making the point that the animal sacrifices had no real power to take away sins.

They couldn't restore Adam to Eden. But they had this wonderful function that they pointed forward down the long road of history to the real sacrifice that really would bring forgiveness.

Verse 3 here in chapter 10 makes the point that the Old Testament sacrifices were obviously ineffective because they were annual. They had to be repeated every year. There are certain things we have to do that have to be repeated and you never get to the end of it.

[19 : 56] You shave yourself in the mirror, gentlemen, some of you, in the mornings. And however well you do it, however much you feel it's as smooth as a baby's bottom, you have to do it again the next day, don't you?

It has to be repeated again and again. Or if you're bailing out a boat, there you are with the waters coming in, you're bailing and bailing and bailing away and you can't stop. You've got to keep doing it. But with this, the point is being made that it never has to be done again.

The effective sacrifice for sin would never have to be repeated once it was done. Once done, done for all time. And this is exactly what the sacrifice of Jesus has achieved.

Just look back to chapter 9, verse 26. But as it is, as things really are, he has appeared once for all, once and once only for all time at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

And look at verse 28. Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time. So it never has to be done again. This sacrifice, friends, is the real thing.

[21 : 04] So if you are a person who has put your trust in the Lord Jesus, your sin has been dealt with. Every sin. Everyone. And you are on the road to the presence of God which has Eden restored.

Heaven. Good news, isn't it? So the Old Testament pattern has been repeated in the work of Jesus. God has provided the Lamb because he is the Lamb of God who has died as our substitute.

And the remarkable thing is that Jesus is both the priest and the victim because he is the priest who offers the blood but it is his own blood that he offers. Now let me make just two points from Hebrews.

And here is the first. As our priest, Jesus has offered a perfect sacrifice for sins. On the cross, although it is true to say that men killed Jesus and at one level he was in their power and they did to him as they pleased.

The greater truth is that Jesus voluntarily offered himself. Yes, men nailed him to the cross so in one sense he was in their hands but more importantly he went there purposefully and freely out of love for you and me.

[22 : 21] As he says in John chapter 10, no one takes my life from me but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.

The wages of sin is death but Jesus has paid that wage for us so that we shouldn't have to. Jesus has offered a perfect sacrifice for our sins.

That's the level of security in which Christians stand. And then second, as our priest, Jesus has provided for us continual access to God.

Now think of the Old Testament temple for a moment. The Old Testament temple, the very way in which the building was structured was designed to show that access to God was not open.

The Old Testament temple was a system of barriers. First of all, Gentiles were only allowed into the very outer court so the court of the Gentiles. Then ordinary Israelites could come into the next section, the first part of the temple but were barred from going further.

- [23 : 23] Then you had the holy place where the priests would come to offer the sacrifice, and so on. And then finally you had the holy of holies, this inner room which contained the ark and the ten commandments and nobody was allowed in there except the high priest and that was only once a year on the day of atonement.

And it was God who designed it that way to have all these barriers, to demonstrate pointedly and painfully that access to his presence was not open, was not free.

So the holy of holies symbolising God's very presence, you remember was separated from the holy place by a big, tall, thick curtain and the moment that Jesus died on the cross that curtain was torn in two from top to bottom symbolising the fact that in the death of Christ access to God has now been flung open and we're welcomed if we'll trust him and repent, we're welcomed into the presence of God not back into Eden but into heaven itself.

So Jesus has provided for us continual access to God. The consequence of this is first of all that no temple is now needed.

A building like this is not a temple. God doesn't dwell here specially. The temple of the Holy Spirit is the place where God dwells now is in the hearts of those who belong to Christ. So if we start thinking templish thoughts about our buildings we need to kick those thoughts out as fast as we can.

- [24 : 48] It's not going to be helpful to us. And equally no priestly caste of people is now needed because all Christian people are described in the New Testament as the priesthood of the Lord who acts now as go-betweens to the world as we pass on the gospel to others.

But let me just pass on a final thought. To be really thankful for this priestly work of Christ we need to grasp it not only with our minds but also with our hearts.

Our minds can trace this whole story from the Garden of Eden through the book of Exodus the book of Leviticus and finally to the priesthood of Jesus and the cross and we can see how satisfactorily and satisfyingly the whole thing fits together.

But there's more because we need to ponder what it cost Jesus to do this for us. He suffered in his priestly work in a way that we can scarcely imagine.

he died on a cross on a tree which was the symbol of the divine curse. He was tormented by the forces of hell.

- [25 : 58] In the words of Paul God made him who had no sin to be sin for us. The perfect sinless son of God as he hung upon the cross became sin.

He didn't wear our sins lightly as you and I might wear a jacket or a coat slung over our shoulders. No, he became sin. As Martin Luther put it, the greatest sinner ever.

And God forsook him as he hung upon the cross. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? God was not there. There was no voice of reassurance or encouragement.

There was nothing to soothe him or to comfort him. God had poured out his anger, the fullness of it against human sin onto Jesus and he was now absent. Jesus was anathema, condemned, ruined.

The wages of sin is death. Jesus hung on the cross as the last Adam experiencing the penalty with which God had long ago threatened the first Adam.

- [27 : 03] The day you eat of it, you will surely die. It cost him to be our priest, to be our intermediary. So let's be very thankful and live with him.

If there are any here who have not yet taken advantage of what he's done for us, come to him. Come to him while there is time. He is a wonderful priest and what he provides is the full forgiveness of our sins forever.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. our gracious God, no scheme of human thought or imagination could have devised a gospel like this and we know it all came from you, from your loving heart and your initiative that you sent your son for this purpose that he might bear our sins upon the cross and be the perfect go-between between you and us who had rebelled.

Please, therefore, our dear Father, accept our thanks today and please give us great joy as we humbly and with awe and reverence walk before you day after day and learn to live more and more for you.

Please build us up in our confidence and our sense of security, we pray, so that we may share this wonderful news of a wonderful saviour with many others. We ask it in Jesus' name.

[28 : 37] Amen.