

THE WORK OF A PRIEST

by Ray C. Stedman

I want to speak to you this morning as to a company of priests. I wonder how many of you have thought of yourselves in that way. If you have read anything at all about the Protestant Reformation you know that 400 years ago in Germany a monk by the name of Martin Luther began to dig up and bring into light and focus certain truths which the Scriptures teach but which had been lost sight of for centuries. One of the most radical of these ideas was what he called "the priesthood of every believer." In those days the church taught that there was a body of men set aside to be a special group of priests who acted as a kind of intermediary between God and the rest of ordinary men. But Martin Luther exploded that idea. He taught from the Scriptures that there is no such body at all but that every person who comes to know Jesus Christ is constituted a priest under God and that he joins with the great high priest, Jesus Christ himself, in a ministry of mercy, blessing, and service to a world which is fragmented and bleeding and broken, that this is our ministry, this is the calling to which God has called us. That idea hit with radical impact in Europe as people began to catch on to the exciting adventure of being this kind of a priest unto God. Thus developed the great historical movement which brought into being a whole new way of life for our western world, what today we call the Protestant Reformation.

In the 400 years since that time, unfortunately, that truth has largely been lost sight of again. Once again all over this country, congregations sit, and soak, and sour. They are absorbing, but not giving out. They are being taught, in many places, but are not loving. As a result they have lost the excitement of the Christian experience. They are bored and frustrated and fearful, and they don't know what to do with themselves, because they have lost this great secret. But I am excited today that the Spirit of God is calling us back to a rediscovery of the priesthood of every believer. This is the subject we are examining in this great passage in the book of Leviticus, the eighth chapter.

We will continue this morning the study we began last Sunday of the day on which Moses, under the command of God, established on earth a body of priests, a priesthood. He began, as we saw last week, by setting aside first of all the high priest. That was Aaron, the half-brother of Moses. Throughout the Scriptures, therefore, Aaron becomes a type, or picture, of our great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. It was quite fitting that Aaron be set aside first, before his sons, because the sons of Aaron are a picture of the priesthood of every believer. As we look at this passage you are going to learn some very exciting things about what God can do with your life to make it the most exciting adventure you have ever dreamed of, to enable you to become the instrument of the working of God in the lives of others.

As we saw last Sunday, the high priest was first washed and then clad in his beautiful garments. Each of those garments is a revelation of an aspect of the work of our great high priest, of what he is able to do for us. So the Lord Jesus Christ fulfills this picture in our lives today. I do not know of any truth more greatly needed in our day and, I am sure, in this congregation, than the great truth of the immediate availability of the Lord Jesus Christ as our high priest to meet our emotional and intellectual problems right where we are living today. There is no way in which life can be handled adequately other than on the basis of that provision.

But now, moving on in the chapter, beginning with Verse 10 we read:

Then Moses took the anointing oil, and anointed the tabernacle and all that was in it, and consecrated them. And he sprinkled some of it on the altar seven times, and anointed the altar and all its utensils, and the laver and its base, to consecrate them. And he poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head, and anointed him, to consecrate him. And Moses brought Aaron's sons, and clothed them with coats, and girded them with girdles, and bound caps on them, as the Lord commanded Moses. {Lev 8:10-13 RSV}

There is the anointing of the high priest. It took place, you notice, before the sons were anointed, even before

they were dressed. That is very significant because that is exactly what happened in history. Here you see one of those beautiful examples of how the Old Testament, written hundreds and hundreds of years before the earthly ministry of our Lord, yet captures exactly what Jesus did when he came and fulfilled these words. You recall that when Jesus went down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist, after the baptism John said, "Behold, the heavens were opened and I saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,'" {cf, Matt 3:16-17}. That was God's anointing of the great high priest by a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the dove, so that his ministry as a priest would always be a Spirit-filled ministry. Now here you have the same thing beautifully portrayed. Moses takes the oil, which also is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and he anoints the high priest, Aaron. And he does so prior to the anointing of the sons. Just as Jesus was anointed for his ministry long before the anointing of the disciples by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost so here Aaron is anointed before his sons.

But following the anointing of Aaron Moses brought Aaron's sons and clothed them with coats, and girded them with girdles, and bound caps on them. Here we are moving into a picture of our own ministry. We are to the Lord Jesus Christ in our own priestly ministry as Aaron's sons were to him. Just as the garments of the high priest were a picture of his character and of what he could do, so these three items are a picture of our ministry and of what we can do. Now don't take this impersonally! This is God speaking to you. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ this is what God calls you to, and this is the provision for it.

First of all there is the coat. As we saw in connection with the high priest, the coat is a picture of the righteousness of Christ imparted to us. We are clad in his righteousness. That is, we don't please God and earn his approval by our activity on his behalf. I know lots of Christians across this country who are working their fingers to the bone, who have dedicated themselves to what they regard as the work of the church, and who work long, exhausting hours with the hope that somehow it will make God more pleased with them. But if you labor on that basis as a priest before God you will find yourself under a cloud of guilt which will never dispel itself. You will find yourself always wondering whether you have done quite enough. And as a result you will be discouraged and defeated all the time. But the true priest of God is called to put on the coat of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. So you are allowed to make some mistakes! You are allowed to fail at times. Because it isn't your ministry which is going to make you acceptable in God's sight; it is his. His life makes you accepted in the Beloved. That is the meaning of the coat.

Around the coat was bound the girdle. As we have also seen, the girdle, in Scripture, is always a picture of a servant character. It signifies a willingness on the part of every believer to meet other people at the point of their need, right where they are, right where they hurt, to stoop and give ourselves to that purpose and not to be concerned whether we get anything out of it or not -- just as the Lord Jesus, in the upper room on the night that he was betrayed, took a towel and girded himself and with a wash basin began to wash the disciples' feet {John 13:1-17}. Why did he start with washing their feet? Because their feet were dirty; they needed to be washed. And though he was the Lord of glory it didn't stop him from taking towel and basin, and beginning to wash their feet. That is the ministry of a servant. This is what we are called to do -- to meet people right where they need us and to help them there.

Recently my wife and I were back in Charlotte, North Carolina. As we boarded the plane for our return flight home we noticed a rather large woman ahead of us who had a tiny boy with her. She announced to all within earshot that this little boy was her grandson and that anyone who wanted to have him was welcome to him because he was a terrible nuisance and she didn't want to be troubled with him. She kept declaiming all the way up the steps and into the plane so that everybody, I noticed, was being very careful not to sit near her.

But as it happened, she ended up in the row right across the aisle from us. We were beginning to take off when my wife and I looked over and saw her there all huddled up in her seat with her eyes closed, biting her fingernails, and obviously scared to death. Elaine said to me, "Do you know what her trouble is? She's scared!" Sagely I said, "Yes, it does appear that way." (You could almost see the sweat dripping off her palms!) And I said, "Would you like to help her?" -- because Elaine was sitting in the aisle seat as my buffer! She unbuckled her seat belt, slid across the aisle, and sat down beside this woman, much to the distress of the stewardess, because we had actually started our takeoff run.

Buckling herself into the seat Elaine said to her, "Are you scared?" The woman said, "I'm scared to death! I just don't know what to do! I wish I could get aboard a plane and not be so frightened." Elaine said, "I know just how you feel. For years that happened to me. Every time I'd get aboard a plane I'd feel terribly frightened. But it doesn't bother me anymore. The fear is all gone." The woman said, "How did you get over it?" Elaine told her, "Well, we live in California and we've come to Charlotte for Billy Graham Day. Since you live here in Charlotte I'm sure you know of his ministry." The woman said, "Oh, yes!" Elaine said, "Have you ever heard George Beverly Shea on television or in a crusade stand up and sing 'He's Got the Whole World in His Hands'?" She said, "Yes, I've heard him sing it." Elaine told her, "That song has particular significance to me because I know now that I am in God's hands, and that knowledge removes my fear. And incidentally it may comfort you to know that Bev Shea is sitting two seats behind you on this plane!" And the woman said, "Well, everything's all right, then, isn't it?" And in a few minutes she began to display a quite different attitude -- and was back to her usual troublesome self! But perhaps a seed was planted. And this basically is the ministry of a priest. This is what priesthood is for -- to meet people at the point of their need.

What excitement comes into our lives when we begin to discover that God wants to use us that way! You see, priesthood doesn't go on in temples today -- not in sanctuaries under stained-glass windows -- by men with stained-glass voices. Rather, it goes on out in homes and shops and schools and playgrounds and parks -- places where people are. That is the kind of ministry God is calling us to -- that of a servant who moves in where people hurt, where they need us, and, even though it may cost us something or be a bit unpleasant at times, begins to minister to their need at that level.

The third article of clothing was the cap bound around the head. And as we saw, just as the turban on the high priest is a picture of the mind bound by the authority of the Word of God, captured and held by that word of reality, so this cap of the priest is a picture of the mind under the control of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it in First Corinthians 2:16, "We have the mind of Christ." And in Second Corinthians 10:5 he says that we are to "bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." That means to look at life as Jesus sees it, as he reveals it to us, and to set aside all the illusions and fantasies and delusions that this world follows. We are not to adopt their standard of values and their system of gaining power and precedence over others but are to look at life the way God sees it, and to have the mind, as we are thinking through our problems and approaching our situation, under the control of the word of God and the authority of Jesus Christ. All this is necessary to priesthood: the righteousness of Christ, the servant-attitude, and the mind under the authority of Christ. And when you are in this relationship you can be a priest to this poor, broken, fragmented, bewildered, and hurting world, and you will find many opportunities to do so.

Next in this process of establishing the priesthood came the sacrifices. We will not deal with them at any great length because we have already looked at them and at what they mean. But I do want to call attention at this point to the fact that it was necessary to offer sacrifices. As the letter to the Hebrews makes clear, the Lord Jesus, as the fulfillment of the great high priest, has no need to offer sacrifices for himself, for he was without sin. But Aaron was a man, and his sons were men. They needed these sacrifices and so they offered them.

First was the sin offering, described for us in Verses 14-17. This is God's continual reminder to us that the basic, elementary, fundamental problem about human nature is our tainted, twisted, distorted, fallen self, and that we never can solve a single problem until we start on that basis and deal with the problem of evil in human life. We can never go from there until we have recognized that God has dealt with this in Christ. That is why the sin offering comes into this account over and over again. It is God's constant reminder.

I stress that because there are many books circulated today which are being read by Christians and which suggest that if you simply learn how to think differently, if you learn how to discover hidden possibilities within your self, if you learn how to develop all the powers of your personality in a proper way, and learn psychologically how to relate properly to people, you can, by that very process, achieve success in life and can also have a more powerful witness as a Christian. Now, there are many good ideas in these books. But almost invariably you will find that in them there is no dealing with the fundamental problem of human evil. There is no recognition that the flesh -- all that we are as natural men -- has been set aside by the cross of Christ as producing nothing whatsoever of value, and that it is only on the basis of trust in the activity of the Spirit of God within us that despite all the quirks of our personalities our human potential can be fulfilled. If you read these books on that basis, then they make good sense. But if you don't, if you miss that proviso, then these

books can be very damaging.

Just this week somebody came and talked to me about a book on psychocybernetics, a book which, if followed without any recognition of the basis upon which we must live, will be very destructive. It will lead into an exaltation of the flesh, into a way of trying to make work what God not only says cannot work, but which he would never accept even if it did. But if it is read in the light of the sin offering, in the light of the fact that we need to operate on a new basis, a new arrangement for living, then there are many ideas in the book which can be helpful.

Following the sin offering came the burnt offering, in Verses 18-21. I will simply remind you that the burnt offering is a picture of the life wholly available to God, in terms of the words carved behind me here on this platform: "You are not your own; you are bought with a price," {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. That is not harsh nor severe; that is the way fulfillment is achieved -- by recognizing that God loves you, owns you, and wants to use you, wants you to say "Yes, Lord, here I am to be used as a priest."

Then the third offering was the offering of ordination, given in Verses 22-24, which we will read:

Then he [Moses] presented the other ram, the ram of ordination; and Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the head of the ram. And Noses killed it, and took some of its blood and put it on the tip of Aaron's right ear and on the thumb of his right hand and on the great toe of his right foot. And Aaron's sons were brought, and Moses put some of the blood on the tips of their right ears and on the thumbs of their right hands and on the toes of their right feet, and Moses threw the blood upon the altar round about. {Lev 8:22-24 RSV}

What a strange ceremony that is! What does it signify? I think it is almost obvious if you have followed along in the meanings of these symbols. Blood is always a reminder to us that we have no value apart from the death of Christ on our behalf and our life again in him. That is all that God ever accepts as of any value whatsoever out of our time here on earth. And here the priest is to have a blood-stained ear, a blood-stained thumb, and a blood-stained toe.

He is to hear God's word as someone who has already been redeemed, who listens to the Word of God with the recognition that he is not merely hearing some good ideas but is listening to that which can release him and relieve him of pressures and problems -- all because he has already been bought by that blood. In other words, we are to hear the word of God not as mere philosophy but as that which teaches us instructively, deep within our hearts.

And then we are to serve man. That is what is always symbolized by the hand, the thumb, probably the most useful member of the human body. We are to serve as blood-stained people, recognizing that we have no righteousness in ourselves, that we are just like everybody else, no better than anyone else, and we offer our help not with self-righteous judgmentalism, not "holier than thou," not as people who have achieved perfection, but as ones who, like those we help, are very much in need of the constant cleansing of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Remember that in his letter to the Galatians Paul says, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted," {cf, Gal 5:1}. That is, remind yourself that you may be the next one to fall. And when you fall you don't want someone coming to you pointing the finger and judging you severely, saying, "Look at what you've done. Why, I'd never do a thing like that!" Rather, you want someone to come to you with the realization: "Brother, maybe I've never done what you've done, but I know I certainly could have. If it weren't for God's grace I long ago would have done worse than that. I just want you to know that I understand how you feel right now, and I want to see you cleansed as God is able to cleanse."

Finally there is the blood-stained foot, which represents walking through life with a reminder that the cleansing of God's grace is needed every day, that we never are perfect in this life, that though God has made provision for a life of service and of walking in the Spirit, nevertheless we all have failed to some extent every day in

laying hold of it. God has understood that and has made provision for it, for cleansing us as we walk.

The offerings continue with the offering of the fat and the thigh and the breast, and then conclude with the meal offering. Verses 25-29:

Then he took the fat, and the fat tail, and all the fat that was on the entrails, and the appendage of the liver, and the two kidneys with their fat, and the right thigh; and out of the basket of unleavened bread which was before the Lord he took one unleavened cake, and one cake of bread with oil, and one wafer, and placed them on the fat and on the right thigh; and he put all these in the hands of Aaron and in the hands of his sons, and waved them as a wave offering before the Lord. Then Moses took them from their hands, and burned them on the altar with the burnt offering, as an ordination offering, a pleasing odor, an offering by fire to the Lord. And Moses took the breast, and waved it for a wave offering before the lord; it was Moses' portion of the ram of ordination, as the Lord commanded Moses. {Lev 8:25-29 RSV}

We don't need to dwell upon these. We have seen already that the fat, the thigh, and the breast symbolize richness, strength, and peace in the inner life acceptable to God. The meal offering is a type of the human response which says, "Here I am, Lord, my humanity is at your disposal. I'm ready to be used of you."

Then Moses took some of the anointing oil and of the blood [notice that -- the oil and the blood] which was on the altar, and sprinkled it upon Aaron and his garments, and also upon his sons and his sons' garments; so he consecrated Aaron and his garments, and his sons and his sons' garments with him. {Lev 8:30 RSV}

Here is another beautiful example of how the Scriptures are so accurate. When Moses anointed Aaron as a type of Christ, our great high priest, he used only oil, the symbol of the Holy Spirit. But when he anointed the sons, who are a picture of our priesthood, he used oil and blood -- oil to symbolize the Holy Spirit, and blood to represent the redeeming value of the death of Jesus -- so that our priesthood is based upon a dual recognition that we are to minister in the power of the Spirit and on the basis of a personal experience of the forgiveness of sin. And that is the only right we have as priests to approach other people. If you attempt to help someone else on any other basis then you are offering strange fire before the Lord. We are going to see the result of that in the next chapter. But on the basis of being forgiven yourself and of recognizing that the Spirit of God can work through you, then you can actually help.

Finally we read:

And Moses said to Aaron and his sons, "Boil the flesh at the door of the tent of meeting, and there eat it and the bread that is in the basket of ordination offerings, as I commanded, saying, 'Aaron and his sons shall eat it'; and what remains of the flesh and the bread you shall burn with fire. And you shall not go out from the door 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. As has been done today, the Lord has commanded to be done to make atonement for you. At the door of the tent of meeting you shall remain day and night for seven days, performing what the Lord has charged, lest you die; for so I am commanded." And Aaron and his sons did all the things which the Lord commanded by Moses. {Lev 8:31-36 RSV}

And no wonder! When Moses added the words, "If you don't stay here night and day for seven days, if you leave this place, you will die," they took him seriously and decided to stay where they were. They did all that the Lord had commanded. Because God is very serious about these things he can be ruthless when he needs to be. As we will see in the very next chapter there is an instance when that became necessary.

God's command to Aaron and his sons was to stay there in the doorway of the tent of meeting. You know that the tabernacle is a picture of the human body. In our human bodies, interpreting this to apply to us, we are to wait and feast upon the symbols of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf: the right thigh of the animal, which is the symbol of his strength; the breast, representing his affection for us; and the bread of the meal offering, symbolic of the life of Christ, available to us. We are to feed on these, symbolically, for seven days, like these

priests, until strength is perfected.

Seven is always the number of perfection in Scriptures. This is a little clue as to how God works. We ask him to do things for us and we often get upset because he doesn't respond like the genie in the Arabian Nights tale who suddenly appears when we rub the lamp and cries, "Master, here I am; what do you want me to do?" Even though we have asked him in accordance with his promises to act, sometimes he seemingly delays. But here we see a process of feeding and waiting, which is God's way of working strength out to perfection. These priests were taught, right from the start, that the way God works often is to delay, seemingly, in answering. In the meantime we are called upon to feed, to think, to remind ourselves of the strength of the One who was sacrificed on our behalf, the Lord Jesus, and of his love for us, and his life available to us, and thus to await God's working out of his purpose.

That is one of the hardest things in life to do. As I have been trying to live through this past summer, which has been a difficult one for me, I have had to learn to wait upon God in a way that I had never learned before. It has been a very difficult lesson. This is what the New Testament calls becoming "strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might," {Eph 6:10 RSV}.

At a pastors' conference this past week this was the theme that I was given the responsibility of developing, from the sixth chapter of Ephesians. The passage concerns the spiritual warfare of the believer. It begins with those stirring words of charge, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." {Eph 6:10 RSV}. It was wonderful to watch the Spirit of God dealing with the men at this conference. As we came to the end of our time together it had become abundantly evident to every man there that the world in which we live is such a mixed up, troubled, torn, and bleeding world that the only source of strength and power adequate to handle it available today, for any person, is to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

We learned that wickedness is so massive and so entrenched in our day, that darkness is so intense upon the minds and in the thinking of men, that the troubles people are going through are so tangled and so apparently hopeless, that violence is so close to the surface and indifference so widespread that to try to tackle such tremendous evil apart from the strength which is made available to us in Jesus Christ is a hopeless task. But as we learn to rest and to feed and to wait upon God these problems can be solved. What a ministry this opens up before us!

In our next study together we will go on into Chapter 9 where we will look at the eighth day, which is always a day of resurrection. And something marvelous happens on the eighth day. But all of this is given to teach us how God is working in our lives right now.

My question to you is: Have you discovered your priesthood? Are you willing to be that kind of a priest now, as God has called you to be? Will you reach out to this fragmented world with all its trouble and heartache, and toward one another -- we need each other's ministry as priests -- and thus discover how exciting it can be to be the means by which God begins to change lives all around you?

I challenge you to try it!

You will discover that God means every word he says and that the ministry of the Great High Priest himself to your own heart is all that it takes to equip you for what God has given you to do. Go out and be God's priest in this world, this week!

Find someone at the point of his need, ask the Holy Spirit to work through you as you go about meeting that need, and see how God can use you as a priest. What an exciting ministry it will be!

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, thank you for this look at Aaron and his sons. We ask you to open our spiritual eyes so that we can see beyond Aaron and his sons to Jesus Christ and his family, the great body of Christ of which we are a part. As you are calling us to this priesthood and asking us to be available on these terms in our daily life we ask you, Lord, to teach us how to

do this. We pray that you will set before us circumstances which will give us opportunity. And may there be not one of us who knows the Lord Jesus who will say, "This doesn't apply to me." Help us to expect you to move in this way and to bring to us this week someone in need to whom we can be a priest through the strength and power of the One who has been a great priest to us, our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask in his name, Amen.

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