

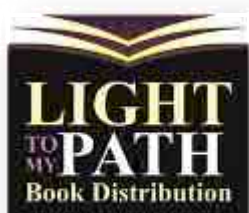
The Priestly Line

A Survey of the Old
Testament Priesthood
from Adam to Jesus,
the Great High Priest

F. Wayne Mac Leod

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*A Survey of the Old Testament Priesthood from
Adam to the Lord Jesus, the Great High Priest*



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Preface

This is a study of the priesthood of the Old and New Testaments. The purpose of the study is two-fold. First, to provide, in summary form, an overall picture of the priesthood of God from its early beginnings to the time of the Lord Jesus. Second, to show what the priesthood in the Old Testament reveals about our need of new priest in the person of the Lord Jesus.

As you read you will see how the Old Testament priesthood developed over time, moving from being the responsibility of the family head to an established role in the tabernacle. As the nation matured, the priesthood grew with it. The changes that took place were not always accepted by the people. In fact, lives would be lost as people rejected the purpose of God for the priesthood. The northern kingdom of Israel would completely abandon the Levitical and Aaronic priesthood and establish their own order of contrary to the purpose of God.

The priests struggled in their role. There were times when the worship of God and the role of priest was abandoned for years. While many priests sought to honour the Lord God, there were others who fell into deep sin and immorality. Some were struck dead for their blasphemous ways. Ultimately, the priesthood would turn their back on the Lord God and crucify His Son on a cross.

Hebrews reminds us that these priests were themselves sinners who fell short of God's standard. They could not remove the guilt of sin from the nation. For the guilt of sin to be removed, a new priesthood would be required. This priesthood was not from the Old Testament tribe of Levi or the family of Aaron but a totally new priesthood from the order of Melchizedek. The Lord Jesus would ultimately do what no priest before Him could do – provide complete forgiveness and remove the penalty of sin. He did so by offering His own life on the cross. He now stands as our perfect High Priest having broken the barrier between us and the Father.

My prayer for this study is that it would point people to the Lord Jesus and help the reader to understand the need of the Priesthood of Jesus. I trust that it will give the reader a new appreciation of the work of Christ on our behalf. May the Spirit of God be pleased to use this study to elevate the name of Christ and exalt His work as High Priest for us.

God bless,

F. Wayne Mac Leod

Chapter 1-

Family Priests

We begin our study of the Old Testament priesthood with an examination of its function in the book of Genesis. Before doing so, however, we need to understand the basic role of the priest and why he was necessary. This brings us back to the fall of humankind into sin and its entrance into the Garden of Eden. Sin became a barrier between God and His creation. The result was physical death and a loss of fellowship with God. From the moment sin entered the world, there was a need for someone to intercede on behalf of humankind before its Creator.

A quick look at the Old Testament shows that God setup a system of sacrifices and offerings. These sacrifices provided for the forgiveness of sin and restoration of God's people to fellowship with Him. The role of the priest was to bring these offerings and sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. The priest stood between God and the people seeking forgiveness and favour from God. With this basic starting point, let's look at the book of Genesis to see what it tells us about this role of priest. We begin in Genesis 4, just after the fall of creation into sin.

Cain and Abel

In Genesis 4 we have the first record of an offering being made to the Lord.

3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. (Genesis 4)

Notice that there are two types of offerings brought to the Lord in this passage. The first is an offering from the ground—this was the offering of Cain as a tiller of the soil. The second offering was the sacrifice of the firstborn of the flock of Abel. Both types of offerings were commanded by the Lord in the Old Testament (see Numbers 18:13-17).

It is not our purpose to enter a discussion on why one offering was accepted and the other was not. For the purpose of this study it is important that we notice several details. Notice, how Abel brought the firstborn of his flock as an offering. Notice also that he offered the fat portions to the Lord. It would not be until later, under the leadership of Moses, that the offering of the firstborn of the flock would become an established regulation (see Exodus 13:1). It was in commemoration of the fact that God spared the firstborn of the families of Israel when they left Egypt. This was not something Abel understood but practiced nonetheless. Also, the fact that he offered the fat portions to the Lord is significant. God would put this in writing later in the time of Moses but somehow Abel understood this to be the requirement of God even before it was regulated by Moses (Exodus 29:13).

What we see here are the sons of Adam bringing their own offerings to the Lord. In the case of Abel, we see him sacrificing the offering and bringing the fat portions to the Lord. While Cain's offering was rejected, there is good evidence

that this had nothing to do with his offering but the attitude and manner in which he brought it. In this time, before the Law of Moses, it appears that individuals would offer their own burnt offerings or thanksgiving offerings to the Lord.

Noah

In Genesis 8 we read of the judgement of God on the earth in the form of a flood. Noah and his family alone were saved from this worldwide devastation because God told them to build an ark and to seek shelter there. When the waters subsided and the family was finally able to leave the ark and walk on dry ground, Noah gathered his family before him and on their behalf offered a great sacrifice to the Lord.

18 So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. 19 Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by families from the ark. 20 Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. (Genesis 8)

Noah acted as a priest on behalf of his family. He had a sense of what animals were clean and acceptable to God and offered them on an altar as a burnt offering for forgiveness and the blessing of God on his family. God was pleased with Noah's offering and promised His blessing by committing to never again destroy the earth with a flood.

After Noah, we have no record of individuals like Cain and Abel offering sacrifices. We see, however, numerous occurrences of the head of the family taking on this responsibility for his family.

Abraham

Genesis 12 tells the story of how God called Abram out of the region of Ur and promised to make him a great nation. In obedience to the command of the Lord, Abram took his family and left his home in Ur to follow the leading of the Lord. As he travelled, he arrived in the region of Shechem. There in Shechem the Lord spoke to Abram:

7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. (Genesis 12)

Abram's response to the Lord was to build Him an altar.

From Shechem, Abram moved toward the region of Bethel and appeared to settle for a time. Notice what he does when he arrived in Bethel.

8 From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. (Genesis 12)

In both Shechem and in Bethel, Abram built an altar to the Lord. The altar was used for sacrifices and offerings. As the head of the family, he saw it as his responsibility to build these altars and to bring the necessary sacrifices to God on behalf of His family. Abram appears to act as a priest for his family.

It seems that wherever Abram moved, he would build an altar. We read in Genesis 13:

18 So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD. (Genesis 13)

As time when by, the promise of God to make of his descendants a great nation seemed more and more impossible in the eyes of Abram. On one occasion, he asked God about this promise. God showed Abram the stars of the sky and told him that his descendants would be numerous like those stars. Abram believed the words of God but wanted some sort of sign from God as a guarantee of His promise. In response, God asked Abram to bring Him an offering:

8 But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" 9 He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. (Genesis 15)

Abram was told to sacrifice a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon, cut them in half and lay them side by side. God would walk through these corpses saying something like this: "If I do not fulfil my promise to you, may I be like these animals that lay dead on the ground." Through this great sacrifice, Abram is confirmed in the promise of God for His family.

Abram, whose name was changed to Abraham by God was well accustomed to bringing sacrifices to God on behalf of his family. This becomes very evident when God called him in Genesis 22 to offer his son on an altar. In

obedience to God, Abram took Isaac, his son, and left early in the morning for a mountain in the region of Moriah (Genesis 22:1-2).

We are not told how old Abraham's son Isaac was at that time but he was old enough to walk, carry wood and understand what was happening. As they were walking up the mountain to make the sacrifice, Isaac questioned his father:

7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Genesis 22)

This question of Isaac to his father gives us insight into the life of the family. Isaac was aware of the procedure even as a young child. He speaks here about a burnt offering and the need of a lamb. It is obvious from this that regular sacrifices took place at his home. He had seen his father perform these sacrifices and knew what to expect. From this is it quite clear that Abraham acted as a priest for the entire family.

Evidence of Abraham acting as priest is further seen in Genesis 17 when God commanded that all males of his family be circumcised.

23 Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. (Genesis 17)

Notice that this verse is quite specific. Abraham circumcised Ishmael, every son born in his house and all his male

servants. When his son Isaac was born Genesis 21:4 tells us that Abraham circumcised him also. Abraham took this spiritual responsibility on himself as God's priestly representative for his family.

As priest, Abraham would also cry out to God on behalf of his family. We have an example of this in Genesis 18 where God reveals to him that he was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Knowing that his nephew Lot and his family was in this city, Abraham petitions God to save the city for Lot's sake. While the city was ultimately destroyed, Lot and his two daughters were rescued due to Abraham's petition. Abraham felt a God-given burden to intercede for his family and cry out for God's favour on their lives.

Isaac

When Abraham's son Isaac grew up and had his own family, he would carry on the priestly tradition. When God met him in the region of Beersheba, he too would build and altar there to sacrifice and worship:

23 From there he went up to Beersheba. 24 And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake." 25 So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well. (Genesis 26)

Not only did Isaac offer sacrifices to the Lord but we have a record in Genesis 27 of him blessing his children. This act of blessing was one carried out by a priest, who would call on the favour of God for his people.

Jacob

Isaac's son Jacob wrestled with God on behalf of his family. Genesis 32 records the story of how he fought with an angel and refused to let him go until he had blessed him and his family. His wrestling was long and hard but he longed to see the blessing and protection of God on his family and he was willing to risk all to obtain this blessing for them.

Genesis 33:18-20 records how Jacob arrived in the city of Shechem and there he erected an altar to the Lord. Again, we see that as the head of his household it was his priestly duty to assure that sacrifices were made on their behalf.

When Jacob moved to Bethel in Genesis 35 he would build an altar at the command of the Lord.

1 God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." 2 So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. 3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." (Genesis 35)

Notice that the command to build an altar came from God to Jacob. He was the priest for his family and so God spoke to Him. As priest and spiritual head of the family, Jacob called on his household to put away all foreign gods and purify themselves. There is Bethel he would perform the sacrifices necessary for his family.

In Genesis 48 and 49 Jacob would also offer his blessings and prophetic words to each of his children before he died. He spoke to them the words of God and brought them the blessings and warning of God. This too was his priestly role as head of the family.

Let me give one more example before we conclude. While there are some questions regarding the date of the book of Job, there are some interesting similarities here with the book of Genesis. Job is described as a righteous man who loved the Lord. His children, however, did not share his heart. This concerned Job very much and in response he would personally offer sacrifices to God on their behalf:

4 His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.
5 And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually. (Job 1)

Notice again what is happening here. Job acts as priest for his family. He was concerned about the possibility that in their festivities they would sin or curse God in their hearts. He felt obligated as a result to rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings for each of them, imploring the forgiveness of God on their behalf. Clearly Job saw himself as a priest for his family and like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sought the favour and forgiveness of God for each of his children.

What we see from the book of Genesis and Job is that initially the family head would act as priest for his family. He would set up an altar and bring the necessary offerings and sacrifices to God on their behalf. He would implore the favour of God and pronounce His blessing on the family.

For Consideration:

- Why was a priest necessary?
- Did those who acted in the role of priest in Genesis have any special qualifications for their role?
- What do we learn in this chapter about the important spiritual role of the head of the family? What were his obligations?
- How do you function as priest over your family?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He did not leave us in our sin but provided a means whereby we could be restored to fellowship with Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you a deeper sense of your obligation as a priest for your family.
- Thank the Lord that He was willing to use even simple people to represent him before their families. Ask Him to help you to be a faithful representative.

Chapter 2-

The Priesthood of Moses in the Wilderness

It appears from the books of Genesis and Job that the role of priest was exercised by the head of the family. This practice would change as the nation of Israel continued to grow. By the time they left their bondage in Egypt there were over 600,000 men and an unnumbered amount of women and children:

37 And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. (Exodus 12)

Remember that Pharaoh had tried to kill all the male children of Israel. We could assume therefore, that there was an even greater number of women leaving Egypt. If, however, there were the same number of women to men and only two children for every family, we could safely assume that about 2.5 million people left Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

Israel was no longer a small family but a growing nation. God called Moses not only to deliver His people from bondage but to lead them to a land of their own and establish them as a nation under God. The establishment of Israel as a nation required clear guidelines and regulations.

Those guidelines were established under the leadership of Moses. Through Moses, God would lay out His requirements for Israel as a nation. Those requirements involved special days and celebrations to remember the goodness of God and His deliverance. The Passover, for example, was to be celebrated every year in remembrance of how the angel passed over every home in Israel whose doorposts were marked with the blood. The law regarding God's ownership of the firstborn offspring of every child or animal, was also in remembrance of how God spared Israelite children while killing the firstborn of every family in Egypt.

In those early days in the wilderness, Moses seems to act as a priest for the nation. He would hear from God and communicate His words to the people. He would seek the Lord on behalf of the people and their needs:

We have a record in Exodus 17 of a great battle with the Amalekites. Joshua, Israel's military commander, engaged these enemies in battle, but Moses went up to the top of a hill and held his staff high in the air. Listen to what happened that day:

11 Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12 But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. 13 And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. (Exodus 17)

Moses is the person who stood between God and the people. As he held up his rod, the people were victorious but

when it fell down the enemy began to win. The outcome of the battle was from the Lord but it required the effort of Moses holding up His hands to the heavens. Moses' role as priest was vital for the people of God to win the battle.

It was not long before the task of being priest over a whole nation became too much for Moses to handle. His father-in-law perceived this when he saw Moses spending the entire day counselling the people in the ways of the Lord. Jethro suggested that Moses find able men who could help him to minister to the people, leaving the more difficult cases to him.

21 Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. 22 And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace." (Exodus 18)

Moses would follow the advice of his father-in-law and appoint men to help him judge and counsel the people in the will of the Lord. This set Moses free to hear from the Lord about His greater purpose for the nation of Israel.

Through Moses, God would unfold His plans for the nation. He instructed Moses in the religious ceremonies that were to be practiced in Israel as well as in the behaviour He expected of His people. The regulations God gave Moses in those days covered all aspects of life – what they could eat, their social responsibilities and the punishments to be

handed out to those who disregarded God's ways. As a priest, Moses instructed his people in the ways of the Lord and made sure that God's instructions were being followed in the nation of Israel.

Moses' role as priest also required interceding for Israel before God. The people did not always follow the ways of God. There were times when they would anger Him to a point where He threatened to destroy them as a nation. We have such a case in Exodus 32 when the people asked Aaron to make a god for them. In response, Aaron fashioned a golden calf in the fire and set it up for the people to worship. Listen to the response of God to this in Exodus 32:

7 And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" 9 And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you." (Exodus 32)

Notice how God's anger was such that He considered destroying the nation and raising up another through Moses. The response of Moses is significant:

11 But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of

Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (Exodus 32)

Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the people, begging Him to forgive and not exercise the judgement His people deserved. He implored Him for mercy and compassion. God heard the prayer of Moses relented.

In Exodus 33 God told Moses that He would send His people to the land He had promised their fathers but His personal presence would not go with them lest He consume them on the way because of their evil. Both Moses and the people grieved over the fact that the presence of the Lord would not be with them and so Moses again pleaded with the Lord on behalf of the people.

12 Moses said to the Lord, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.' 13 Now therefore, if I have found favour in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." 14 And he said, "My presence will go with you, and

I will give you rest.” 15 And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. 16 For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?” 17 And the Lord said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.”

Because of the prayer of Moses for the people, God again relented and promised that His presence would go with the people on their way to the Promised Land.

What is clear from the book of Exodus is that at the beginning of their wilderness wandering, Moses had a very special role a national priest. He exercised this role by counselling and judging cases between individuals. In each case, he would seek the will of the Lord and counsel people accordingly.

As priest, Moses would hear from God and communicate that message to the people. Moses would oversee the religious celebrations God had instituted. He made sure that the sacrifices and offerings made to God were performed according to the regulations God had given Him.

Moses also saw it as his priestly obligation to intercede for the people in their sin and rebellion. He did what He could to counsel and teach the people of God but when they sinned, Moses would cry out to God for mercy on their behalf. He stood between God and the people as an intercessor pleading their case.

The time in the wilderness was a period of transition for the people of God. During the initial period of this wandering it appears that Moses takes the lead as spiritual advisor and priest for the people. He stands between God and the people, communicating the will of God, interceding for them in their sin and guiding them into the will of God for their lives.

After a period of four hundred years in Egypt, it is uncertain as to how much the people of Israel understood of God's purpose for their lives. It is unclear if the heads of the families had exercised their role as spiritual priest over their family units during this time in Egypt. Moses led the people into the truth of God and His purpose for their lives, transitioning them into a new phase of their life as a nation and in their experience with God.

For Consideration

- Moses spend entire days counselling and seeking the will of the Lord for individuals. His counselling, however, had to do with seeking God's purpose and not sharing his own ideas. How easy is it to share our own ideas with people and not really seek the will of God for them?
- There were times when the life of the nation hung in the balance and the only thing that would save them was the prayers and intercession of Moses. How important was praying and interceding for Moses as priest? How important is it for us today?

- After 400 years in the bondage of Egypt, it is unclear how much the people of God understood the will of God and His purpose for their lives. How important was the teaching side of Moses' priestly ministry?
- We have seen that the priestly ministry of Moses involved counselling, intercession and teaching. Take a look at your church today. Are any of these aspects missing?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a heart to intercede for those around you who are not walking with the Lord.
- Ask the Lord to give us men and women in our churches today whose desire it is to teach God's ways and communicate God's heart and not their own ideas.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for those who have had a spiritual impact on your life and who have held you up before God in times of deep distress and pain.
- Pray for those who are in spiritual leadership over you. Ask that Lord to give them a heart for the people to whom God has called them. Ask Him to reveal to them the significance of the ministry He has called them to.

Chapter 3 - The Levites

The exodus from Egypt was a significant event for the people of God. It is interesting to note that as they prepared to leave, the Lord God commanded that each family sacrifice a lamb and paint its blood on the doorposts of their homes in Egypt. When the angel of God passed over their homes and saw the blood of the lamb, he would spare their firstborn son. The angel of the Lord would, however, kill the firstborn child in any house that did not have this blood painted on its doorposts. God gave specific instructions for the sacrificing of this lamb to the heads of the households:

3 Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. 4 And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbour shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. 5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, 6 and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight. (Exodus 12)

Prior to leaving the nation of Egypt, the head of the household was to act as priest for his family by making this sacrifice.

The death of the firstborn sons in the families of Egypt was the final plague that God uses to set the Israelites free from slavery. Pharaoh chose to let the people go after this event. The incident was significant also for another reason. Because God spared the firstborn of Israel, when the family heads painted the blood of the lamb on their doorposts, He required that every firstborn of Israel be consecrated to Him from that point forward in remembrance of this event.

1 The LORD said to Moses, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast is mine." (Exodus 13)

The Lord would go on to explain this consecration of the firstborn to His people:

11 "When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, 12 you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord's. 13 Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. 14 And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. (Exodus 13)

Notice what Exodus 13 tells us. All firstborn male animals belonged to the Lord. If the animal was an unclean animal, the people were to buy it back from the Lord. If the firstborn was a donkey for example (an unclean animal) and they were unwilling to buy it back from the Lord, then they were to kill the donkey. If the firstborn was a clean animal such as a sheep, it would be sacrificed to the Lord. It was not theirs to keep.

With regard to the firstborn male children, listen to the requirement of the Lord:

15 Everything that opens the womb of all flesh, whether man or beast, which they offer to the Lord, shall be yours. Nevertheless, the firstborn of man you shall redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. 16 And their redemption price (at a month old you shall redeem them) you shall fix at five shekels in silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty girahs. (Numbers 18)

The cost to buy back a firstborn son was five shekels of silver. When they arrived in the land of Canaan, this would be paid to the priests and the money used in the work of the tabernacle.

As the nation grew, the practices of their faith became more structured, God commanded that a tabernacle be built as a central place of worship. He then chose one of the families of Israel to be His servants in the work of the tabernacle in the place of the firstborn of Israel:

11 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 12 "Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens

the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, 13 for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the Lord.” (Numbers 3)

While the obligation to redeem every firstborn child remained, the tribe of Levi was chosen to represent the firstborn of every family in Israel by serving the Lord full time. We read in Numbers 3 what the general responsibilities of these Levites would be:

6 “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. 7 They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. 8 They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle. 9 And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. (Numbers 3)

The Levites were involved the care of the tabernacle and its furnishings and assisting the priests in their various duties. We will examine the priesthood in the next chapter. For now, our focus is on this tribe of Levi whose role was to assist in the work of the newly constructed tabernacle. Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath and Merari (Numbers 3:17). Each of these sons and their descendants would be given a task in the ongoing work of the tabernacle.

The sons of Gershon, (the Gershonites) were given the responsibility of caring for the covering of the tabernacle, the

doors and the hangings in the court yard (Numbers 3:25-26). The sons of Kohath (the Kohathites) were to care for the ark of the covenant, the table, lampstand and other temple furnishings. Finally, the sons of Merari were to care for the frames, bars and pillars of the tabernacle. As the people of God moved from place to place in the wilderness, after their escape from Egypt, these Levites would carry the tabernacle and its furnishings. When the people camped, these Levites would setup the tabernacle according to the instructions of God so that the people had a place of worship.

The Levites were much more than caretakers, however. They also had a variety of other tasks to perform in the service of God. 1 Chronicles 23 gives us a better idea of the various responsibilities of the Levites:

27 For by the last words of David the sons of Levi were numbered from twenty years old and upward. 28 For their duty was to assist the sons of Aaron for the service of the house of the Lord, having the care of the courts and the chambers, the cleansing of all that is holy, and any work for the service of the house of God. 29 Their duty was also to assist with the showbread, the flour for the grain offering, the wafers of unleavened bread, the baked offering, the offering mixed with oil, and all measures of quantity or size. 30 And they were to stand every morning, thanking and praising the Lord, and likewise at evening, 31 and whenever burnt offerings were offered to the Lord on Sabbaths, new moons, and feast days, according to the number required of them, regularly before the Lord. 32 Thus they were to keep charge of the tent of meeting and the sanctuary, and to attend the sons of Aaron, their

brothers, for the service of the house of the Lord.
(1 Chronicles 23)

According to this passage the Levites would cleanse the holy articles and prepare them for use by the priests. They would assist the priest with the offerings. They led in worship of the Lord in the various celebrations that took place in the life of Israel. 1 Chronicles 9:26 tells us that they were also in charge of the offerings and treasury of the tabernacle and would manage this on behalf of the people. We also have records of the Levites being involved in the teaching of the Law of God (see 2 Chronicles 17:8-9 and Nehemiah 8:7-13). In many ways, the role of Levite could be comparable to the role of deacon or elder in the church of our day.

As Israel grew, so did her spiritual needs. The need to teach and counsel the people of God grew. There were more sacrifices to be offered and more offerings to manage. God provided the Levites to help in this important role. Under the leadership of Moses in the wilderness, the faith of Israel became more structured. A place of worship was constructed. This tabernacle would move with them wherever they went. The descendants of Levi (the Levites) cared for the tabernacle and its various articles. While the obligation of the head of the home to be a spiritual leader for his family continued, there was also developing in Israel a national faith with spiritual leaders and a central place of worship. The Levites played a vital role in the maintenance and ministry of this central place of worship.

For Consideration:

- Who were the Levites?

- What was the role of the Levite in the spiritual life of Israel?
- Why was it necessary for an entire family line to be set apart for the service and worship of God?
- How does the establishment of a Levitical role change the religious life of the people of God in those days?
- Compare the role of the Levite to the role of a deacon or elder in the church today? What are the similarities?
- The Levites were servants who often assisted in ordinary and common tasks. Their role, however, was very important. How willing are we to recognize those in our church who exercise these ordinary and unnoticed duties?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for men and women who act as servants to facilitate the worship of God in your church.
- The role of Levite was often a “behind the scenes” role. Ask God to make you to be a servant who willingly serves if you are noticed or not.
- Ask the Lord to show you if there is a role He would have you play in the worship and service of the body of Christ.

- The change from a family centred faith to one of a more centralised faith would not be an easy adjustment for everyone. Have there been changes in your church or life that have been difficult to understand or adjust to? Ask the Lord to give you grace to be willing to move as He moves. Ask Him to give you a heart that is willing to change when He calls for change.

Chapter 4 - The Aaronic Priesthood Established

We saw in the previous chapter how the Lord chose a family from among the people of Israel to represent Him on behalf of the nation of Israel. The male descendants of Levi were to be set apart for the service of God.

It should be noted that up to this point there was no central place of worship. The people of God worshipped in family units with the head of the family acting as priest on their behalf. As the people of Israel left the land of Egypt, the Lord instructed Moses to build a tent or tabernacle where the worship of God would take place (see Exodus 26). As we saw in the last chapter, the Levites played an important role in caring for this tabernacle. God also chose another family to act as priests for the nation as a whole. Speaking to Moses in Exodus 28, God said:

1 Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. (Exodus 28)

Aaron and his sons were set apart by God to act as priests for the nation. Their descendants alone would carry this honour as priests of Israel.

This position of priest was elevated by God. The people of Israel were to respect the descendants of Aaron as their spiritual leaders. To distinguish this family from everyone else, God commanded Moses to make special clothing for them to wear:

2 And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. (Exodus 28)

These clothes identified them as priests of God, called to serve and minister to the spiritual needs of the nation. When people saw them in these clothes, they would remember to honour them as God's chosen instruments.

In the breastpiece that Aaron wore were two stones called the Urim and Thummim. It is unclear as to how these stones were used, but they were used in the judgement of the people of God. God chose to use these stones to communicate His will for the people through the priest.

30 And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly. (Exodus 28)

God chose to communicate His specific will for the people through these two stones worn by the priest. As such, the priest would be equipped to speak on God's behalf in the various situations that occurred in Israel.

Aaron and his sons were set apart in an elaborate ceremony of ordination involving many sacrifices and offerings (see Exodus 29). By this means Aaron and his sons were separated from all the other people in Israel to be spiritual

leaders. From generation to generation, they would minister in God's name to the people of Israel (see Exodus 40:15). No other family was permitted to serve as priests.

This special calling on the descendants of Aaron was not accepted by everyone. In Numbers 16 we have the record of a rebellion against God's choice. Korah, Dathan and Abiram gathered 250 chiefs from the people of God and approached Moses to speak with him about this matter. Listen to what they had to say to Moses and Aaron in Numbers 16:3:

3 They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD? (Numbers 16)

Prior to this time, the heads of the family units were appointed to act as priests for their families. Korah and his followers didn't see why they had to have Aaron as their priest nor why he should be elevated above them. They rebelled against the idea of a centralised priesthood.

It should be remembered here that Korah was a Levite. As such, his own family had been chosen out of the nation of Israel to serve at the tabernacle. He still resented, however, the fact that Aaron's descendants were given the role of priests. Moses spoke to this issue in Numbers 16 when he replied to Korah:

8 And Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: 9 is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service

in the tabernacle of the LORD and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, 10 and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also? (Numbers 16)

Moses saw the jealousy of these Levites as they watched Aaron and his sons be elevated above them. They loved the fact that they had been chosen from all others to be servants in the tabernacle, but resented the fact that God had called someone else to an even higher position.

To confirm His call on the family of Aaron, God gave a word to Moses for Korah and his followers:

28 And Moses said, "Hereby you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works and that it has not been of my own accord. 29 If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. 30 But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD. (Numbers 16)

Numbers 16:31 tells us that as soon as Moses had finished speaking, the ground spilt apart and swallowed the families of Korah with all their belongings, confirming that God had chosen Aaron's descendants to be priests over them.

Despite this clear sign from God, the people still resisted the Lord and grumbled against Moses and Aaron, God's chosen priest. The Lord sent a plague against them. Only when Aaron took his censer and walked with it through the congregation of offenders was this plague stopped. Before

it was stopped, however, 14,700 people were killed (see Numbers 16:47-50).

This transition to a centralised priesthood did not come easy. There were many lives lost as people grumbled and complained, but it was clearly the will of the Lord to establish a priesthood who would act on behalf of the people as a nation.

The descendants of Aaron were given a special role in the religious life of the people of God. They were given responsibilities before God that even the Levites could not perform. This is evident in Numbers 18:

2 And with you bring your brothers also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may join you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony. 3 They shall keep guard over you and over the whole tent, but shall not come near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar lest they and you, die. (Numbers 18)

It is clear from this that while the Levites cared for the tabernacle and the transportation of its furnishings from place to place, they were not permitted to minister on behalf of the people in ceremonies involving the use of the vessels. To do so would mean death for the Levites and possibly even the priests who permitted it.

What we see here is that as the faith of Israel developed, it became more and more centralised. With the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood, the sacrifices and ceremonies are being handed over to a specific group of men who would minister in the tabernacle. It was a sin punishable by death for anyone else to approach the altar to make a

sacrifice or use the oil or incense set apart for God and His worship (see Exodus 30:37-38).

The intention of the centralisation of Israel's faith and religious practice was that as the nation grew and spread out, its integrity and purity would be maintained. With over 2.5 million people in the nation it would be very easy for them to lose focus and wander off into false practices. Remember that many of these former Israelite slaves very likely could not read, nor was there any Scriptures to guide them in the practice of their faith. God was only now beginning to reveal to Moses His purposes for Israel's faith. While Moses would write down what the Lord was showing him, these writings would not have been available to the average person. The families of Israel did not have copies of the law in their homes. They were dependant on the instructions they received from Moses, the priests and the Levites. It was the obligation of these priests and Levites to assure that faith was practiced as God intended.

For Consideration:

- What was the difference between a priest and a Levite? How was it determined who would be a Levite and who would be a priest?
- How were the priests set apart from everyone else in Israel? Have we lost some of the respect due to our religious leaders today?
- Was the transition to a more centralised worship easy for Israel? Give an example.

- What were the benefits of having the faith of Israel centred around the tabernacle with priests who alone could minister to the spiritual needs of the nation?
- Consider the jealousy of Korah and his followers. Do you ever experience this jealousy when God chooses to use someone else besides yourself to accomplish His purpose?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for those He has chosen to be your spiritual leaders. Take a moment to commit them to Him.
- Ask God to give you grace to not grumble but to respect those He has put in authority over you. Ask forgiveness for times when you have spoken evil of them.
- Ask the Lord you help you to accept the changes that come your way, especially as it relates to your church. Pray that these changes would be for His glory alone.

Chapter 5 - The Responsibility of the Aaronic Priesthood

In the last chapter, we saw that the Lord called for a priesthood to be established from the family of Aaron. Before proceeding further in this study, I would like to take a moment to consider the responsibilities of the priests as defined by God to Moses.

We have seen the responsibilities of the Levites as assistants to the priests. While the Levites were priests of a sort, the descendants of Aaron had some very particular responsibilities.

Sacrifices

One of the first obvious responsibilities of the priests was to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. It is not our purpose in this study to at the various types of sacrifices offered. Suffice it to say that the priests offered sacrifices of thanksgiving as well as sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin. It was the duty of the priest to bring these sacrifices to the Lord:

12 The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not go out. The priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall arrange the burnt offering on it and shall burn on it the fat of the peace

offerings, 13 Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out. (Leviticus 6)

God gave very specific instructions to the priests about the procedure involved in the sacrifice of these animals (see Leviticus 1). They were to be careful to follow these instructions.

Offerings

Another important aspect of the priest's duties involved receiving the offerings of God's people. We see this clearly from Leviticus 2:1-3:

1 "When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the Lord, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it 2 and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. 3 But the rest of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the Lord's food offerings.

Offerings were brought to the tabernacle and given to the priest who would bring them to God on behalf of the individual concerned. Notice also that a portion of the offering brought to the Lord was given to the priest (Exodus 29:26; Leviticus 7:31-32). It was by this means the priests were paid for their service on behalf of the people.

Purification

We learn also from Leviticus 13 and 14 that the priests were also involved in the purification of the people from uncleanness and impurities that defiled them before God. We have in Leviticus 13 a set of rules established by God for the diagnosing and treatment of leprous conditions of the skin. The priest was to examine the sores on the skin of those affected. If they exhibited certain signs they were to be separated for a time from the rest of the people. If the condition improved, the priest was to declare them pure through a ceremony of purification (see Leviticus 14:1-32).

The priest not only examined skin conditions and declared individuals either pure or impure he was also to do the same for houses or clothes when a form of mould was growing on them (Leviticus 14:33-57). This role guaranteed the health of the nation. It also made sure that no physical defilements separated God's people from their Creator.

Overseeing and Handling the Holy Things

Another responsibility of the priests was to oversee the holy things of God. This involved the oil, incense, offerings, and vessels used in the service of the Lord.

16 And Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest shall have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering and the anointing oil, with the oversight of the whole tabernacle and all that is in it, of the sanctuary and its vessels. (Numbers 4)

While in some cases, the priests were assisted by the Levites, it was the priests who gave oversight and handled the sacred articles used for the worship of God.

Social Justice

The priests also were involved in judging cases between believers. In Numbers 5:11-31, for example, we have the case of a man suspecting his wife of adultery. The priest was to settle this matter. The priests were also to be involved in judging cases of murder or theft. Deuteronomy 17:8-10 gives us an example of a man charged with murder coming before the priests for judgement:

8 "If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns that is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose. 9 And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. 10 Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the Lord will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. (Deuteronomy 17)

Teaching

A very important role of the priest was to teach the people the ways of God. Listen to the command of Moses to Aaron in Leviticus 10:

8 And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, 9 "Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you,

when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. 10 You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, 11 and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.”

Notice here that Moses commands Aaron to teach the people the difference between what was holy and common; clean and unclean. The priest was to teach the people of Israel “all the statutes the Lord has spoken to them by Moses” (Leviticus 10:11). The priests were to be teachers of the Law of God.

Counselling and Encouraging the People

Deuteronomy 20:2-4 gives us further insight into the duty of the priest:

2 And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people 3 and shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies: let not your heart faint. Do not fear or panic or be in dread of them, 4 for the Lord your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.’ (Deuteronomy 20)

In times of crisis such as a battle, the priest was to be present to encourage the people and to remind them of the presence of the Lord going before them. The priest was to stand before the people and give them courage to face these challenges in the strength of the Lord.

The role of the priest was to represent God to the people. This was done through offering sacrifices, receiving offerings, judging, teaching, encouraging and purifying the people so that they could be right with God and enjoy the fullness of His blessing. This was a very important role in Israel, as the health of the nation depended on the work of the priests on their behalf.

The role of priest was to be exercised by Aaron and his descendants only. Anyone outside this family line who chose to exercise the priest's functions was to be put to death:

10 And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. (Numbers 3).

Those who were legitimate priests in the line of Aaron were to take their role seriously. They were to be careful to exercise their functions exactly as God required and as revealed to them by Moses. Any disrespect shown to God in this matter was punishable by death. We have an example of this in Leviticus 10:

1 Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. 2 And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. (Leviticus 10)

We see here that Aaron's sons offered incense that was not commanded by God through Moses. The anger of the Lord fell upon them and they died because they had chosen to do things their own way and not according to the standards God had laid out. This was a clear revelation to

the remaining priests of the seriousness of walking in absolute obedience to the Lord in their service.

The High Priest

We have seen so far that there were two groups of priests. The Levites were from the tribe of Levi and assisted the priests who were from the family of Aaron. Among the priests, however, God chose one man to be known as the High Priest. He was dressed differently from the other priests, wearing a special breastplate with the names of the children of Israel carved on twelve stones. He also carried in his robe two stones known as the Urim and Thummim by which he could discern the will of the Lord. The High Priest alone could enter the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle once a year to offer sacrifices for the nation. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of this when he says:

6 These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, 7 but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. (Hebrews 9)

The High Priest oversaw the work of the priests and had special obligations before God on behalf of the nation. He alone was given this privilege to enter the Most Holy Place.

As the people of God sat at the foot of Mount Sinai on their way to the Promised Land, God revealed His purpose to them for the priesthood. He had chosen a family of priests who would act on behalf of the families of Israel for their spiritual wellbeing. It was to these individuals alone that God had given the task of administering the affairs of the

tabernacle. There were strict punishments for those who dared to exercise these functions without God's authority.

It is quite clear from this that the function of priest now rested in the hands of a select few, chosen by God for this task. These priests alone would handle and oversee the sacred things of God.

For Consideration:

- What aspects of the role of priest are similar to the role of pastor today?
- What aspects of the priest's role are different from the pastor's role today?
- Why was it important for the Lord to centre religious duties and obligations around the priest? How would this guard the integrity and purity of the faith?
- How serious a matter was it to disregard the procedures laid out by God through Moses? How important is it to maintain the purpose of God in our worship today? Are there examples of churches wandering from the purpose of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you a respect for the spiritual leadership He has placed over you?

- Take a moment to pray that your spiritual leaders would be faithful to do things God's way and to teach only the truth He has revealed clearly in His Word.
- Ask God to show you the role He has for you in His kingdom.

Chapter 6 - The Priesthood in the Wilderness

From the time of the establishment of the priesthood until Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan, there were two high priests. Let's take a moment to consider these two men and their contribution to the spiritual life of Israel in the wilderness.

Aaron

Aaron was the first high priest. He was the brother of Moses. His role was contested by Korah in Numbers 16. God punished Korah and his followers for refusing to accept Aaron as His choice for priest by allowing the earth to open and swallow them alive (Numbers 16:29-30).

As if the death of Korah and his followers was not enough, Numbers 17 recounts the story of how God confirmed Aaron as priest calling for the chiefs of all the tribes of Israel to bring a staff to Moses. These staffs were marked with the names of each chief and placed in the tabernacle. When the people went to the tabernacle the next day, Aaron's rod had produced blossoms and bore ripe almonds. This miraculous event proved once again that God had chosen Aaron and his family to represent them as priests.

As High Priest, Aaron had the privilege of going up the mountain with Moses into the presence of God. Speaking to Moses God said:

24 And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them." (Exodus 19)

Notice that while the other priests were not permitted on the mountain lest they die, only Aaron, as the High Priest was given this wonderful privilege.

On another occasion, the Lord gave Aaron and his sons the privilege of seeing His presence from a distance on the mountain of Sinai:

9 Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, 10 and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. 11 And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank (Exodus 24)

As high priest, Aaron had these privileges of meeting with the Lord in a special way.

In the absence of Moses, Aaron would take on the role of leader and judge of the people. Speaking to the people of Israel before he went up into the mountain to be with the Lord God, Moses said:

14 ... "Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them. (Exodus 24)

Of course, the judgement of Aaron was not always wise. We read in Exodus 32 how the people grumbled because Moses was so long on the mountain. They petitioned Aaron as their spiritual leader to make them a god they could see. Aaron submitted to their plea and made a golden calf for them to worship.

Aaron also had difficulty with his own sons. Leviticus 10 recounts the story of how his two sons Nadab and Abihu were exercising their priestly duties when they decided to offer "unauthorized fire" before the Lord. Their disregard for the command of the Lord and their disrespect for His ways brought the fire of God's judgement upon them and they died. As you can imagine this would have been a very difficult blow for Aaron as high priest and father of these two boys.

Aaron, is portrayed as a man who interceded for his people. When his sister Miriam was struck with leprosy for her opposition to Moses, Aaron pleaded with God for her restoration. God listened to their prayer and their sister was restored to health (Numbers 12).

When the congregation of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in Numbers 16 the Lord sent a plague to consume them. Moses told Aaron to take his censor and move out among the people to appease the wrath of God. Aaron did so and as Aaron pleaded with God for the forgiveness of the people, the Lord heard his prayer and stopped the plague. That day 14,700 people died. We can only imagine how many more would have perished had it not been for the intercession of Aaron on their behalf as high priest.

According to Exodus 16:34 it was Aaron who placed a jar of manna in the ark of the covenant for safekeeping and remembrance of the provision of God in the wilderness. Only Aaron as high priest would have been given access to the ark and its contents.

God gave a special blessing to Aaron to speak over the people:

22 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 23“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

24 The Lord bless you and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

27 “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

Notice that as Aaron pronounced this blessing over the people, God promised to bless them. This is an indication of the authority the Lord gave to Aaron as His representative.

Aaron would die in the wilderness. Numbers 20:22-28 describes how the role of High Priest would be passed on to his son Eleazar. God called Moses to take Aaron and his son Eleazar up to Mount Hor where Aaron would die. Aaron's robe was to be taken from him and put on his son who would from that point on take his father's role as High Priest:

25 Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them up to Mount Hor. 26 And strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron shall be gathered to his people and shall die there.” 27 Moses did as the Lord commanded. And they went up Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. 28 And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. (Numbers 20)

As High priest in those early days Aaron had to deal with people who rejected his authority over them. He was not a perfect priest. He led his people in the worship of the golden calf and his sons Nadab and Abihu were judged by God because of their disrespect of His holy things. Aaron was used by God, however, as a judge and spiritual adviser to the people. He was also used of God to intercede on behalf of his people.

Eleazar

Eleazar is described in Numbers 3:32 as “chief over the chiefs of the Levites.” He was to have “oversight of those who kept guard over the sanctuary” (Numbers 3:32b). There was an administrative side to his role as high priest.

Even prior to his father’s death, Eleazar had the responsibility of caring for the holy things of God:

16 “And Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest shall have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering, and the anointing oil, with the oversight of the whole tabernacle and

all that is in it, of the sanctuary and its vessels.”
(Numbers 4)

As high priest, Eleazar assisted Moses in taking a census of the people of Israel (Numbers 26:1-4). He appears to organize the priests as they performed this task at the request of the Lord through Moses.

Eleazar is often seen with Moses and was involved in judging the people and resolving their conflicts. We have a case in Numbers 27 where the daughters of Zelophehad came to Moses and Eleazar to inform them that their father had died and there were no brothers to inherit his possessions. Normally, the possessions would go to the son. Moses and Eleazar listened to their problem and after bringing this matter to the Lord, informed them of His decision. Eleazar was involved in this decision with Moses.

As Moses grew older, the Lord informed him that he was to commission Joshua to take his place as leader of the people. God commanded Moses to set Joshua apart in a service of ordination. Listen to the description of what took place that day:

18 So the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. 19 Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. 20 You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. 21 And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all

the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation.” 22 And Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and made him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation, 23 and he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses. (Numbers 27)

Moses was to lay hands on Joshua and they were to stand before Eleazar the priest. Eleazar was to consult the Urim and the Thummim contained in his breast piece to see if Joshua was indeed the man God had chosen. By standing before Eleazar, Joshua was submitting to the purpose of God and surrendering to the decision of God for his life as discerned by the Urim and Thummim. Eleazar, as high priest consulted God on behalf of the people about this matter of Joshua as leader of the nation.

Numbers 25 speaks of a time when the people of Israel began to fall into sin and rebellion against God. They were living in the region of Shittim and the people began to offer sacrifices to the gods of the Moabites. Moses was very angry about this and called for the death of those who had been worshipping these foreign gods. God unleashed a great plague on the nation because of their sin. From Numbers 25:8 we understand that this plague would destroy twenty-four thousand people.

While this was taking place, an Israelite man brought a Midianite woman into his tent in the sight of all the people to sleep with her. What is striking about this is that the people of God were weeping and mourning because of this judgement of God against them. Eleazar's son Phinehas saw what this man had done and how he openly defied the law of God. Taking a spear, Phinehas, as priest, went into the tent and ran it through both the man and the Midianite

woman killing them both. It was this action on the part of Phinehas that stopped the plague.

What is particularly interesting in this time, however, is that while the role of priest and high priest is now firmly established in the nation, Moses is a spiritual leader. It was Moses who went up into the presence of God to seek direction for the people. Aaron, though he does have the privilege of going up onto the mountain with Moses is not given the privilege to enter His presence as Moses did. Eleazar is an assistant to Moses even though he is chief over the priests of Israel. He has a role to play in the commissioning of Joshua, but Moses seems to take the lead. Eleazar has the Urim and the Thummim to determine the will of the Lord, but Moses seems to have direct access to God. Until his death, Moses would maintain his role as a chief spiritual leader to the people of Israel, the priests would serve under him and according to his instructions.

For Consideration:

- How does God confirm the role of Aaron and his sons as priests?
- Did the priests always correctly represent God during this time in the wilderness? What happened to Aaron's sons?
- Give an example of how Aaron interceded for the people and their salvation from the judgment of God.
- What administrative duties were the responsibility of Eleazar, Aaron's son?

- How does Phinehas, the son of Eleazar distinguish himself as a priest in the wilderness?
- What evidence do we have that Moses is still the chief spiritual leader of the people of God as they wander through the wilderness? In what sense were the High Priest's his assistants?

For Prayer:

- Aaron did not always make good decisions as high priest. Take a moment to pray for your spiritual leaders asking God to give them wisdom to follow his leading in all things.
- Aaron's sons, though the sons of a high priest, did not walk in the ways of the Lord. Take a moment to pray for the families of spiritual leaders. Ask that God would bring their children to Himself.
- As priests, Aaron and Phinehas interceded for their people. Sometimes this required quick and decisive action on their part. Ask the Lord for wisdom to know when you need to take such action to stop people from falling further under the wrath of God.
- The Levites needed to learn to be servants to the priests. The priests needed to submit to the leadership of the high priest. The high priests needed to listen to Moses. Moses was accountable to God for what He told him. How good are we at submitting to authority? Ask the Lord to give you grace to submit to His order.

Chapter 7 - The Priesthood and the Conquest of Canaan

During the time that God's people were wandering in the wilderness, the Levites transported the tabernacle from place to place as the Lord led them. The priests were involved in the sacrifices and offerings that came to the tabernacle. We read of several occasions where the intercession of the priests averted the wrath of God and saved the nation from destruction.

Moses clearly was the spiritual leader of the nation during this time. He spoke with God and instructed the priests in the ways of the Lord. Moses was an old man, however, and his life was coming to an end. It was time to find a replacement for him as leader of the nation. This replacement would be Joshua.

Joshua would be a different kind of leader. He was a military commander and not a spiritual leader. This meant that the priests would need to take on this role as spiritual leaders in the place of Moses. It should be noted that when Joshua was commissioned as successor of Moses, God commanded that he stand before Eleazar, the high priest, who would consult the Urim and Thummim on his behalf. Joshua was commissioned to his work by Eleazar and by Moses (see Numbers 27:18-23).

Under the capable leadership of Joshua, Israel would soon conquer the land of Canaan. The priests of God, however, would have a role to play in this conquest. The very first obstacle Joshua encountered in his conquest of the land of Canaan was the Jordan River. We are not sure how many million people there were in Israel, but one of his first tasks as military leader was to get them across the river into the land of Canaan.

As Joshua prepared to have the nation cross over the Jordan River, he called on the Levitical priests. He told them to take the Ark of the Covenant and go ahead of the people into the river. They were to keep 3,000 feet or 0.9 kilometres between the Ark of the Covenant and the people. Joshua 3 tells us what happened when the priests bearing the Ark reached the Jordan:

14 So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, 15 and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), 16 the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. 17 Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan. (Joshua 3)

The water of the Jordan River was held back so the people could cross over on dry ground, just as they had crossed the Red Sea under Moses. Although Moses was no longer alive, the power of the Lord was still present in His servants the priests. We can only imagine the incredible sense of awe that struck those priests as they saw nature itself respond to their obedience to the leading of God.

Joshua knew that passing over into the land of Canaan was only the beginning of his task as commander. Now the task of conquering the inhabitants had begun. The crossing of the Jordan took place near the city of Jericho. Joshua's first battle would be against the inhabitants of this important walled city. It is important to note the role of the priests in the conquest of Jericho.

Joshua 6 recounts the victory that God gave Israel over Jericho and the unique way in which the priests contributed to this:

12 Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the Lord. 13 And the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the Lord walked on, and they blew the trumpets continually. And the armed men were walking before them, and the rear guard was walking after the ark of the Lord, while the trumpets blew continually. 14 And the second day they marched around the city once, and returned into the camp. So they did for six days. (Joshua 6)

For six days, the priests took the Ark of the Covenant and walked with the army around the city of Jericho in the presence of their enemies. On the seventh day, they marched around the city with the Ark of the Covenant seven times. On that occasion, the priest blew seven trumpets and the

Lord caused the walls of the city to crumble before them. This gave Joshua and his army the opportunity to invade and conquer the city. The loot from this conquest would be given to the priests for the treasury of the house of the Lord (see Joshua 6:24). In this case, the priests were directly involved with the army in the battle for Jericho.

Over time, Joshua conquered much of the land God had given to Israel. With the conquest of the land it now fell on the leaders of Israel to divide the land between the various tribes and families. Joshua 14 tells us that Eleazar the high priest was involved with Joshua in the division of land:

1 These are the inheritances that the people of Israel received in the land of Canaan, which Eleazar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun and the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the people of Israel gave them to inherit. (Joshua 14)

Zelophehad's daughters approached Eleazar and Joshua in Joshua 17:4 requesting land that Moses had promised them. Joshua and Eleazar saw to it that these women were given the property that was due them. Eleazar, as high priest, was very heavily involved in the division of land and resolving disputes related to the settlement of the people in Canaan. He worked closely with Joshua in this matter.

The land of Canaan was quite vast. In Canaan, the people would no longer be together in one place. They spread out on both sides of the Jordan River. This separation of the tribes to their own parcels of land brought with it a new problem. How were the priests to serve the people when they were spread out over such a large territory? The solution to this is found in Joshua 21 when the tribe of Levi received its allotment of land.

Joshua 21 tells us that the Levitical priests were given allotments of land in the territories of the other tribes. Levi had three sons—Kohath, Gershon and Merari. These sons were the father of three clans—the Kohathites, the Gershonites and the Merarites.

The Kohathites received thirteen cities among the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin and another ten cities among the tribes of Ephraim, Dan and Manasseh (See Joshua 21:4-5). The Gershonites were given thirteen cities among the tribes of Asher, Naphtali, and Manasseh (see Joshua 21:6). Finally, the Merarites were given twelve cities among the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Zebulun (see Joshua 21:7). In total 48 cities were set apart for the tribe of Levi.

As for the descendants of Aaron (the priests), they were given a total of thirteen other cities for their inheritance in Canaan (see Joshua 21:13-19). This meant that a total of 61 cities were set apart for the Levites and the Aaronic priests.

This separation of the Levites into sixty-one cities meant that each tribe would have access to the services of the priests. It also meant a significant change for the priests who had ministered together in one location for many years.

Eleazar, the high priest would die during these early years in Canaan and his son Phinehas would take his place (see Joshua 24:33). Phinehas had distinguished himself in Numbers 25 by going into the tent of a man who was having a sexual relationship with a Midianite woman and killing them both. This action stopped a great plague that God had unleashed upon the nation.

The allotment of Reuben and Manasseh was on the east side of the Jordan River. When the conquest of the western side of the Jordan was completed, they decided to return to their families on the other side of the Jordan. Before doing so, they built a large altar on the east side as a reminder for their children that they were also part of the nation to the west. The meaning of this altar was misunderstood and the tribes to the west of the Jordan, who upon hearing about it, believed that the tribes of Reuben and Manasseh were building a foreign altar to worship another god. It was Phinehas and ten chief leaders who went to their brothers to find out the meaning of this altar. By speaking to their brothers about this, they discovered the true reason for the altar and averted a battle that could have destroyed Reuben and Manasseh. Phinehas the high priest, was involved in resolving this misunderstanding.

As we examine what is taking place in Israel among the priests and Levites at this time in Israel's history, we see that there are some significant changes occurring. As they battled for possession of the land, the priests were used of God to remind the people that the battle belonged to the Lord. With the dividing up of the nation and allotment of land to each tribe, the priests and Levites would also be separated and spread throughout the tribes of Israel. This would bring a new challenge for the people of God and their relationship with Him.

For Consideration:

- How did the priests of Joshua's day take leadership in the conquest of Canaan?

- To what extent does the church of our day have a role to play in the organization of our society? To what extent does the church have a leadership role in the battles our society faces? What are those battles?
- How would the priesthood be reorganized to meet the needs of the nation of Israel when it settled in the land of Canaan?
- To what extent does the church of our day need to change its methods to meet the spiritual needs of the people of our culture?
- What is the difference between changing our method and changing our message?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you as a believer the role He would have you play in your society.
- Ask the Lord to enable your church to have a positive impact on the social and spiritual needs of your community.
- How has your society and culture changed in the past years? Has the church been faithful in ministering to those changes? Ask the Lord to show you how you can reach out with the message of the gospel in a way that touches the people and culture of your day.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be willing to accept changes that are necessary without losing the purity of the message you preach.

Chapter 8 - The Decline of the Priesthood Under the Judges

Under the capable leadership of Joshua, the commander and Eleazar the high priest, Israel conquered the land of Canaan and each tribe in Israel was allotted a parcel of land. The priests were given a series of cities scattered throughout the nation from where they could minister.

Despite the fact priests were scattered throughout the nation, after the death of Joshua the spiritual climate of Israel began to change. Listen to the description of the generation the followed Joshua:

8 And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years. 9 And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. 10 And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel. 11 And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. 12 And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and

bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. 13 They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroht.

When the generation of Joshua died, the new generation did not carry on their faith. In fact, the new generation of Israelites began to bow down to the gods of the nations around them and abandoned the God who gave them the land of Canaan.

The book of Judges tells the sad story of how Israel, because of their unfaithfulness, was delivered over to their enemies. Time and time again in their oppression, they would cry out to God. God would send a deliverer to set them free. Once they were free from their oppression, however, Israel would turn back to foreign gods and again fall under the judgement of God. This cycle of judgement, repentance, deliverance and falling back into sin is repeated many times in the book of Judges.

We are left to wonder where the priests were in this endless cycle of judgement and deliverance. What was happening with the priesthood during this time of the judges? We have a story in Judges 17-18 that gives us a clue. It is the story of a young Levitical priest who lived in the region of Bethlehem. For some reason, this young priest left Bethlehem and travelled to the hill country of Ephraim where he met a man by the name of Micah. Discovering that the young man was a priest, Micah invited him to stay with him and be a priest for his family. He offered him ten pieces of silver a year for this service. The young Levite accepted this position and became priest to Micah and his family (see Judges 17:7-13).

There was unrest in the tribe of Dan in those days. The rulers of Dan sent spies out to explore the land to find another place where they could settle. As these spies searched out the land, they arrived in the hill country of Ephraim and stayed with Micah. There in his home they found this young priest. Realizing that he was a priest, they asked him to inquire of the Lord about the success of their journey and whether they would succeed in finding a place for their tribe to settle. The young Levite told them: "Go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the LORD" (Judges 18:6).

When the spies left the home of Micah, they travelled to the region of Laish and discovered that the people there were living carefree lives, and becoming wealthy in this fertile land. Most important, however, was the fact that they were "unsuspecting". That is to say, they were not suspecting any enemy attack. The spies returned to their tribe and advised them to attack these people and take over their land (see Judges 18:7-10).

The tribe of Dan listened to the spies and sent 600 soldiers armed for battle. As they travelled to Laish they passed through the region where Micah and the young Levitical priest lived. The spies had informed the soldiers that the Levitical priest lived in the region. Learning this, the soldiers surrounded Micah's home and took his priest for themselves (see Judges 18:11-20).

Notice the response of the young priest to being taken by the tribe of Dan:

20 And the priest's heart was glad. He took the ephod and the household gods and carved image and went along with the people. (Judges 18)

The young priest as quite happy to go with them. In his mind, he saw this as a promotion to a higher position. This seems evident in the statement of Dan to him in Judges 18:19:

19 And they said to him, "Keep quiet; put your hand on you mouth and come with us and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?" (Judges 18)

While we can understand the joy of promotion here, it does reveal to us something of the attitude of the young man. He is not concerned about his master, who had taken him in and paid him for his services. The passage tells us that "his heart was glad" when he was taken by force from his master and promoted. His promotion was more important to him than loyalty to his master.

The second and more important detail we need to see here is the fact that when the young Levite was taken from his master, he took the ephod, the household gods and a carved image along with him (verse 19). The reason this is significant is because of what it tells us about the spiritual climate in Israel. This young Levite should not have had these articles. Here was a priest of God leading in the worship of household gods and carved images. This was not the purpose of God for His people. This young priest was leading people away from the Law of Moses and the standard God had laid out for His people.

What was true of this young priest was also confirmed in the lives of other priests at that time. As we move into the book of 1 Samuel we meet Eli, Hophni and Phinehas who were priests in the region of Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:3). Hophni and Phinehas were the sons of Eli the priest. Eli's sons

helped him with the sacrifices that were being made at the tabernacle of God. 1 Samuel 2:12-16 describes how Hophni and Phinehas were disregarding the law of Moses, offering sacrifices in an unauthorized way and taking meat by force. The passage ends with a description of their priesthood:

17 Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt. (1 Samuel 2)

This, however, was not the only sin of the sons of Eli. 1 Samuel 2:22 describes yet another sin:

22 Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting. 23 And he said to them, "Why do you do such thing? For I hear of your evil dealings with the people. (1 Samuel 2)

The sons of Eli were seducing women who were serving at the entrance of the tabernacle. This shows us the moral condition of the priests of that day. These things were not hidden from the general population. Eli, their father, "kept hearing all that his sons were doing" (1 Samuel 2:22).

Eli himself, was not without blame in this matter of his son's actions. In fact, the Lord sent a man to Him in 1 Samuel 2:27 to rebuke him for his unwillingness to do anything about the evil of his sons. Listen to the words of this man of God to Eli the priest:

27 And there came a man of God to Eli and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Did I indeed reveal myself to the house of your father when they were in

Egypt subject to the house of Pharaoh? 28 Did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? I gave to the house of your father all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel. 29 Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded for my dwelling, and homer your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?’ (1 Samuel 2)

Eli was responsible for the holy things of God. It was his responsibility to assure that the sacrifices were offered in a way that honoured the Lord God. He should have dealt with his sons and their evil. Admittedly, he had spoken to them but he refused to discipline or judge them for their disrespect of God and His ways. God accused Eli of scorning the sacrifices and offerings and honouring his sons above his God. God went as far as to say that Eli fattened himself on the choicest parts of the offerings of His people. 1 Samuel 4:18 describes Eli as an old and heavy man.

What was the result of this decline in the spiritual life of the priesthood? 1 Samuel 3:1 tells us that “the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” God rarely spoke to His servants, the priests. By their disrespect for the holy things and the Law of Moses, these priests drove the presence of God from them. In fact, in 1 Samuel 4 we read how the Ark of the Covenant was captured by Philistines and taken away from Israel. Both Hophni and Phinehas were killed in the battle that took place with the Philistines at that time. When Eli heard that the Ark of the Covenant had been taken from Israel, he fell backwards from his chair, broke his neck and died (1 Samuel 3:18).

When Phinehas' pregnant wife learned that her husband had died, she went into labour and gave birth to a child she called Ichabod. Ichabod means "the glory has departed." The decline of the priesthood and the disregard for the ways of God had serious implications for Israel – the glory of God departed from their midst.

For Consideration:

- It seems that the faith of Israel in the days of Joshua was not handed down to the next generation. Has your faith been handed down to your children? What responsibility do we have to hand down our faith to the next generation?
- Israel does not seem to learn from her past mistakes and continues to fall into sin and judgment. How well does our society learn from its past? How well do you learn from your past?
- The young Levitical priest of Micah's household seems to be more concerned about his promotion than for the glory of God. It is possible for us to have this same attitude in our lives today?
- Eli put his family ahead of God and was held accountable to God for this. What kind of things can we put ahead of God?
- How did Eli demonstrate carelessness in his ministry and responsibilities? Are we careless today?

- The glory of God departed from Israel in the days of Eli. What role did the priests play in this? How important is it that we know the glory of God in our midst?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to pray for the next generation. Ask God to give this generation the ability to pass on their faith to the upcoming generation.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have failed to learn from your mistakes and sins.
- Ask God to raise up a generation of spiritual leaders who take the glory of God and the honour of His name seriously.
- Ask God to restore His glory to your land and your church.

Chapter 9 - The Priesthood Under Saul, the First King of Israel

Under the period of the judges in Israel, the priesthood reached a low point in its history. Many of the priests had ignored their responsibilities and wandered from the truth of God's Word. In fact, they were caught up in ungodly and immoral practices.

The priesthood had lost the respect of the community. We read in 1 Samuel 8 that the elders of Israel came to Samuel with a request:

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah 5 and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like the nations. (1 Samuel 8)

Notice what has happened here. The religious leaders of Israel were not giving spiritual leadership to the nation. The people felt this void and determined that they would be better off being ruled by an earthly king, like the nations around them. God had been Israel's king, but the religious leaders were not representing Him faithfully, so the people turned from God and sought an earthly king like the nations around them. This decision would bring Israel into a whole new period of their history.

The priests continued to play a role under the leadership of the kings. The first king of Israel was a man by the name of Saul. In 1 Samuel 14 we have the record of a battle between Israel and the Philistines. Saul's son Jonathan had attacked a Philistine post, unknown to his father. As his father and his army were settled in their camp, Jonathan stole away to attack this post. The Lord gave Jonathan victory by causing great confusion in the Philistine camp. When Saul heard this confusion, he was not sure what to do. He called for the priest to bring the ark of the covenant and consult the Lord for direction (see 1 Samuel 14:16-19). As Saul waited for the word of the Lord, the noise of confusion in the enemy camp grew louder, so he decided to act before he heard what God had to say.

Saul brought the priests with him into battle. The role of the priest was to seek the blessing of the Lord on the battle and to discern the will of the Lord on behalf of the king. The problem was that Saul didn't seem to have the time to wait on them, choosing rather to take matters into his own hand instead.

We have another example of the role of the priest in 1 Samuel 14:36-38:

36 Then Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them until the morning light; let us not leave a man of them." And they said, "Do whatever seems good to you." But the priest said, "Let us draw near to God here." 37 And Saul inquired of God, "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?" But he did not answer him that day. 38 And Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today. (1 Samuel 14)

In this case Saul was ready to go into battle but the priest counselled him to first seek the Lord. When they did seek the Lord, it was discovered that there was sin in their midst. This sin would have hindered the outcome of the battle and needed to be confessed and cleansed before that battle could take place. It was the role of the priests to make sure that the soldiers who fought in the battle were clean and right with God. How many battles have we lost because we have harboured sin in our hearts? The role of the priest was vital for the victory of God's people.

The priest also cared for the articles used in the worship of God and made sure that the Law of Moses was followed regarding worship and the use of the holy things. We catch a glimpse of this role when David was running from Saul in 1 Samuel 21. He and his men had to escape from Saul and did not have time to prepare for their journey. They were hungry and in need of provision. In their need, they went to Ahimelech the priest in the region of Nob for help. They asked the priest for provisions for their journey. Listen to the response of the priest to this request of David:

4 And the priest answered David, "I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women." 5 And David answered the priest, "Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?" 6 So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the Lord, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away. (1 Samuel 21)

While the bread that the priest had was not to be eaten by common people, he had compassion on David and his men and made an exception. Notice, however, that he wanted to be sure that David and his men were ceremonially clean before allowing them this bread. This reveals to us that the priest understood his role as the caretaker of the holy things of God.

There was an individual present that day, when the priest gave David and his men this bread, who was loyal to King Saul. He reported this incident to the king. He told him how Ahimelech the priest has supported David by providing him with provisions for his escape. Saul was very angry with the priests as a result. In response, Saul summoned Ahimelech and the priests who worked with him at Nob. He questioned them about the assistance they had offered David, his enemy.

Saul ordered that these priests be killed, but his guards refused to kill these servants of God, showing respect for their position and call. Saul, does not share their respect of the priesthood and so called upon Doeg the Edomite to kill them. That day 85 priests were killed by Saul (see 22:17-18).

As David fled from Saul, he arrived in the region of Keilah. He was joined there by a priest by the name of Abiathar. This would have been a real blessing for David. On one occasion, he discovered that Saul had come to the city of Keilah to kill him. David needed the direction of the Lord in what to do so he called for the priest Abiathar. He asked Abiathar to seek the Lord on his behalf to find out if the people of Keilah would hand him and his men over to Saul or whether they would protect them. Through Abiathar, the Lord revealed to David that the people of Keilah would in-

deed hand him over to Saul if he stayed in that city. Hearing this, David and his men escaped the city and fled to safety (see 1 Samuel 23:6-14). Again, we see how important the role of the priests was in those days. They sought the Lord and His purpose for the people. They guided the people in the ways of the Lord and warned them of danger.

On another occasion, the enemy came into David's camp, burned it and took his family captive. When David returned to find out what had happened, he again called Abiathar the priest:

7 And David said to Abiathar the priest, the son of Ahimelech, "Bring me the ephod." So Abiathar brought the ephod to David. 8 And David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I pursue after this band? Shall I overtake them? He answered him, "Pursue, for you shall surely overtake and share surely rescue." (1 Samuel 30)

Under the reign of Saul, we see how the priests advised the king. Saul did not always like what the priests had to say and there were times when he simply ignored them. His respect for the priests seemed to depend on how much they agreed with him. He did not hesitate to slaughter them if they went against his wishes. Had Saul continued as king, this tendency to see the priests as simply affirming the wishes of the king may have continued.

David, who lived under the reign of Saul, however, had a deeper respect for the priesthood and their role in communicating the will of God. He often depended on them for advice in his time of flight from King Saul. God would use him to restore the image of the priest and their role in the nation of Israel.

For Consideration:

- What was the role of the priest in the battles of King Saul?
- Does Saul always listen to the words of the priests?
- What do we learn here about the attitude of King Saul toward the priests of his day?
- As David fled from King Saul, how important was the role of the priest to him? How does the priest protect him?
- What role do God's servants have today in guiding the people under them in the truth of God and His Word?
- Do you have spiritual leaders you can trust to guide you in the ways of the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Saul shows his lack of respect for the calling of priest by killing 85 of them because they had helped David. Ask God to give you a respect for those He calls.
- Take a moment to pray for your spiritual leaders. Ask that they would be faithful to guide the people God has put in their care.

- Ask God to help you to be more willing to seek the counsel and advice of godly men and women of faith in the circumstances you find yourself in today.

Chapter 10 - The Reorganization of the Priesthood Under King David

After the death of King Saul, David became king in his place. We have already seen how David, when he was fleeing from Saul, would consult the priest for a word from the Lord. King David would prove to be a man whose heart longed for the Lord, and while he did fall into sin, he continued to seek the Lord and His purpose during his reign as king.

It was David who conquered the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites (see 2 Samuel 5:6-9). He would make this city the centre of his government and faith. One of the first tasks David undertook as king was to bring the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. 2 Samuel 6 describes what took place that day. 2 Samuel 6:3 tells us that they placed the ark of God on a brand-new cart to bring it up to Jerusalem. The cart was pulled by oxen and driven by Uzzah and Ahio the sons of Abinadab the priest.

As they travelled to Jerusalem, David and his followers were celebrating with music. On one occasion, the oxen stumbled. The safety of the ark was threatened as it risked falling to the ground. Uzzah reached out his hand to steady it. For touching the ark, God struck him dead. There are a couple of details we need to understand here.

First, Uzzah, although he was seeking to protect the ark from falling, had failed to realize that he was forbidden by the Law of God to touch the holy things of God. His intentions may have been honourable but he broke the Law of God as revealed by Moses. This is quite clear from Numbers 18:2-3:

2 And with you bring your brothers also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may join you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony. 3 They shall keep guard over you and over the whole tent, but shall not come near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar lest they and you die. (Numbers 18)

The act of reaching out the hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant was in clear violation of the Law of Moses.

The second detail we need to understand here is that God had a prescribed method for carrying the Ark of the Covenant. It was to be carried by the Levites on poles. By placing this ark on a cart and having it transported by oxen, the priests were violating the law of God as revealed to Moses. After this terrible incident, corrections would be made and the Ark would eventually be brought the rest of the way into the city of Jerusalem by Levites who carried it as prescribed by Moses (see 2 Chronicles 15:25-29).

This incident shows us that the priests were not clearly following the Law of Moses. It may be that they were ignorant of these laws or that they had simply forgotten them. For whatever reason, the priests of David's day were not walking in full obedience to the principles of God's Word. They were not caring for the holy things of God as prescribed by the Law of Moses.

By bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, David made that city the centre of faith. Great numbers of priests and Levites would be required in the city to lead the people in worship of God.

Organisation of the Levites

1 Chronicles 23:2 tells us that David called the leader of Israel, the priests and the Levites to assemble before him in Jerusalem. When they were numbered, it was discovered that there was a total of 38,000 Levites thirty years of age and up. It should be remembered that during the time Israel wandered in the wilderness these Levites had been responsible for taking down, setting up and carrying the tabernacle from place to place. This was no longer necessary as the tabernacle had now found a home (see 1 Chronicles 23:26). The question on their minds now was what these 38,000 Levites were to do now that their task of transporting the tabernacle was completed.

David would reorganize the Levites into divisions and give them responsibilities in the ministry that took place in Jerusalem. In 1 Chronicles 23 we read how this was done. Let me summarise this in the following chart:

LEVITES	REPONSIBILITY	REVERENCE
24,000	Work on the House of the Lord	1 Chronicles 23:4
6,000	Officers and Judges	1 Chronicles 23:4
4,000	Gatekeepers	1 Chronicles 23:5
4,000	Offer praise to the Lord with instruments	1 Chronicles 23:5

The Levites would continue as assistants to the priests but now that their task of transporting the tabernacle had come

to an end, they were given new responsibilities. Their responsibilities are described for us in 1 Chronicles 23:26-32:

26 And so the Levites no longer need to carry the tabernacle or any of the things for its service. 27 For by the last words of David, the sons of Levi were numbered from twenty years old and upward. 28 For their duty was to assist the sons of Aaron for the service of the house of the Lord, having the care of the courts and the chambers, the cleansing of all that is holy, and any work for the service of the house of God. 29 Their duty was also to assist with the showbread, the flour for the grain offering, the wafers of unleavened bread, the baked offering, the offering mixed with oil, and all measures of quantity or size. 30 And they were to stand every morning, thanking and praising the Lord, and likewise at evening, 31 and whenever burnt offerings were offered to the Lord on Sabbaths, new moons, and feast days, according to the number required of them, regularly before the Lord. 32 Thus they were to keep charge of the tent of meeting and the sanctuary, and to attend the sons of Aaron, their brothers, for the service of the house of the Lord. (1 Chronicles 23)

Organisation of the Aaronic Priests

David would also reorganise the Aaronic priesthood. He was assisted in this task by Zadok and Ahimelech:

3 With the help of Zadok of the sons of Eleazar, and Ahimelech of the son of Ithamar, David organised them according to the appointed duties in their service. (1 Chronicles 24)

David divided the priestly responsibilities among the priests available from the two descendants of Aaron. He divided the descendants of Eleazar into sixteen divisions. The descendants of Ithamar were divided into eight more divisions. This process took place by the casting of lots (see 1 Chronicles 24:4,5). The responsibilities of the priests and the schedule of their activities would be assigned according to these divisions.

Organisation of the Musicians

1 Chronicles 25 shows us that David also organised musicians to lead in the worship of the Lord. Three individuals were set apart to lead the musicians in the praise of the Lord. Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun along with their sons, were to devote themselves to leading in worship. They played the lyre, harp and cymbals (see 1 Chronicles 25:1). They also led in singing (1 Chronicles 25:7). Altogether there were 288 musicians leading in the worship of the Lord at that tabernacle in the days of David. These men were also divided into twenty-four groups and given their responsibilities in the worship of God.

Organisation of the Gatekeepers

The tabernacle required gatekeepers who made sure that nothing unclean would enter the tabernacle court. 1 Chronicles 26 describes the organisation of these gatekeepers into divisions. Lots were cast to determine which gate these individuals would watch.

FAMILY	GATE	REFERENCE
Shelemiah	East	1 Chronicles 26:14
Zechariah	North	1 Chronicles 26:14
Obed-edom	South	1 Chronicles 26:15
Shuppim and Hosah	West	1 Chronicles 26:16

From 1 Chronicles 26:20-28 we read how David commissioned certain priests to care for and keep account of the gifts received for the work of the tabernacle as well as the spoils of war that were dedicated to the Lord.

Finally, David also set apart 1,700 judges to oversee the work of the Lord west of the Jordan (see 1 Chronicles 26:29-30). Another 2,700 men were appointed to oversee the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh “for everything pertaining to God and the affairs of the king” (1 Chronicles 26:32).

Now that the tabernacle was in a central location, this restructuring of the priesthood was essential. The task of the Levites needed to change. The various divisions of Levites, priests, musicians, gatekeepers, and overseers was clearly laid out by David, and each person knew what their responsibility and schedule for service was. This went a long way in removing any confusion and guaranteed that the needs of the people would be met.

Under David, the priesthood was reorganised. We also see that David set apart a group of priests to lead the people of God in worship through music. It is interesting to note that while the role of the priest and their message remained the same, the external structures and organisation continued to change to meet the spiritual needs of the day.

For Consideration:

- David had the Ark of the Covenant transported to Jerusalem. How does what happened during

the moving of this ark reveal a lack of understanding of God's Laws on the part of the priests at that time?

- What circumstances brought about a need for the restructuring of the priests and their roles during the time of David?
- What is the difference between changing the structure and organisation of the priesthood and changing the role and message of the priests? Can we change how we do the work of ministry without changing our message and responsibilities before God?
- David seems to bring a new vitality to the importance of music in worship by setting aside about 4,000 Levites and organising them into divisions for worship. Under his administration we now have officially chosen worship leaders. How easy is it for us to accept anything new in our worship of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you leaders who are well versed in the teachings of Scripture so that the church of our day will not be led into error.
- Ask the Lord to give you wisdom to know how you need to organise and restructure your ministry to communicate the message of God to the society of our day. Ask God to keep you faithful to the message and responsibilities He has given you in any changes that take place.

- Ask the Lord to give you wisdom to know when you need to make changes to your own spiritual devotions or ministry so that you are growing and accomplishing what He wants for you to accomplish.

Chapter 11 - Kingdom Divided and the Priesthood of God Abandoned

Under King David we saw how the priesthood was organized into new divisions with each division given responsibilities for the overall functioning of the tabernacle and its worship of God in Jerusalem. Of course, there continued to be priests in the various regions of the nation serving in their local communities. Jerusalem, however, seems to be the main centre for the worship of God.

One of the great burdens of King David was to build a more permanent structure for the Lord and the worship of His name in Jerusalem. His vision was a great temple to replace the tent in which the Lord was being worshipped.

The Lord did not permit David to build this temple. However, He did authorise its construction under David's son Solomon. When Solomon became king in his father's place, one of his first tasks was to build the temple his father had envisioned. Upon completion, this temple would provide a more permanent structure in which to carry out the work of the Lord. We are not told what happened to the tabernacle upon completion of the temple of Solomon, but it would be abandoned in favour of this new temple.

During the latter part of King Solomon's reign, he turned away from the Lord, marrying many foreign women. He

even built altars to foreign gods to please his many wives (see 1 Kings 11:1-8). As a result, God raised up enemies against him. Upon his death, Solomon's son Rehoboam would become king. One of Solomon's enemies was a man by the name of Jeroboam. Hearing of the death of Solomon, Jeroboam came to King Rehoboam on behalf of the people and asked him to lighten the burden his father had imposed on them during his reign. When Rehoboam refused to do this, Jeroboam led a rebellion against him. This resulted in a division of the entire nation. 1 Kings 12:20 tells us:

20 And when all Israel heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. There was none that followed the house of David but the tribe of Judah only. (1 Kings 12)

The result of this division was the formation of two separate nations. Israel, in the north was now under the leadership of Jeroboam. Judah remained faithful to the house of David and to Rehoboam their king.

It is important to see what happened to the priesthood in the nation of Israel under the leadership of Jeroboam. King Jeroboam of Israel knew that the people would want to return to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, which was in the nation of Judah. He saw this as a threat to him as king. He didn't want his people returning to Judah. He feared that by them returning to Jerusalem for worship they would be influenced to rebel against him:

26 And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. 27 If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will

turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.” (1 Kings 12)

To assure that this did not happen, Jeroboam decided to make two golden calves. He put one in the town of Bethel in the south and another in Dan in the northern part of the nation.

28 So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” (1 Kings 12)

He told the people of Israel that these golden calves were the gods who brought them out of Egypt. To further establish this new religion, Jeroboam constructed temples for worship throughout the land. He also established a priesthood to oversee this new religion. 1 Kings 12:31 makes it clear to us that these priests were not from the tribe of Levi:

31 He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. (1 Kings 12)

Special days were also set apart like the feasts the people had practiced in Jerusalem. On those feast days, sacrifices were made on the altar to the calf god:

32 And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. (1 Kings 12)

The Lord was not pleased with the decision of Jeroboam and Israel to abandon the faith for this new religion, so He sent a prophet to speak to them. Listen to the words of the prophet concerning the altar used to sacrifice to the golden calves:

1 And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings. 2 And the man cried against the altar by the word of the Lord and said, "O altar, altar, thus says the Lord: 'Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.'" 3 And he gave a sign the same day, saying, "This is the sign that the Lord has spoken: 'Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out.'" (1 Kings 13)

The judgement of God would fall on this pagan altar and on the priests who had abandoned the Lord. It would be defiled and torn down in the years to come by a man whose name was Josiah of the house of David.

The Lord also had a word for Jeroboam, who had led the people of Israel into this false religion with its false priests:

7 Go, tell Jeroboam, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: "Because I exalted you from among the people and made you leader over my people Israel 8 and tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, and yet you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my eyes, 9 but you have

done evil above all who were before you and have gone and made for yourself other gods and metal images, provoking me to anger, and have cast me behind your back, 10 therefore behold, I will bring harm upon the house of Jeroboam and will cut off from Jeroboam every male, both bond and free in Israel, and will burn up the house of Jeroboam, as a man burns up dung until it is all gone. 11 Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat, for the Lord has spoken it.” (1 Kings 14)

The Lord would judge Jeroboam for establishing a new priesthood and religion in Israel. He would cut off every male from his family so that his family line would cease to exist in Israel. Anyone who belonged to the family of Jeroboam who died in the city would be eaten by dogs. Those who died outside the city would be eaten by birds. No one in this family would be given a proper burial.

From the period of Jeroboam until her exile, the northern kingdom of Israel abandoned the Lord God of her fathers, setting up a priesthood in opposition to the Levitical priesthood established by God. Though God continued to plead with the Israel to return to Him, throughout her history as a separate nation she stubbornly refused to worship God and respect the priesthood He had established. Consider the descriptions of the kings of Israel as recorded in the books of 1 and 2 Kings in the following chart:

KING	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCE
Jeroboam	"Made two calves of gold"	1 Kings 12:28
Nadab	"Walked in way of his father" (Jeroboam)	1 Kings 15:25-26
Baasha	"Walked in the way of Jeroboam"	1 Kings 15:33-34
Elah	"Made Israel to sin"	1 Kings 16:13
Zimri	"Walking in the ways of Jeroboam"	1 King 16:19
Omri	"Walked in all the ways of Jeroboam"	1 Kings 16:25-26
Ahab	"Walk in the sins of Jeroboam"	1 Kings 16:30-31
Ahaziah	"Walked in the way of Jeroboam"	1 Kings 22:52
Jehu	"Did not turn aside from sins of Jeroboam"	2 Kings 10:29
Jehoahaz	"Followed the sins of Jeroboam"	2 Kings 13:23
Jehoash	"Did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam"	2 Kings 13:11
Jeroboam II	"Did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam"	2 Kings 14:23-24
Zechariah	"Did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam"	2 Kings 15:8-9
Shallum	"Reigned one month"	2 Kings 15:13
Menahem	"Did not depart all his days from sins of Jeroboam"	2 Kings 15:17-18
Pekahiah	"Did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam"	2 Kings 15:23-24
Pekah	"Did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam"	2 Kings 15:27-28
Hoshea	"Did what was evil in the sight of the Lord"	2 Kings 17:1-2

The impact of the sin of Jeroboam in establishing a new priesthood in Israel was to be felt for years to come. In fact, the entire nation abandoned God for generations because of his influence. The Levitical and Aaronic priesthood was abandoned and God's people turned to another religion. Not one of her kings sought the Lord with all his heart but chose rather to follow the religion established by Jeroboam. The priests of the northern kingdom of Israel in those days were priests of the golden calves and the priests of Baal.

For Consideration:

- What was Jeroboam's motivation behind the abandoning of the Levitical and Aaronic priesthood and the Laws of Moses?
- Consider the fact that when the people of God asked Aaron, the first priest to give them a god they could see, he made a golden calf for them (see Exodus 32). How did this sin of Aaron make it easier for Jeroboam to convince the people that this was the god that had led them out of Egypt?
- How did Jeroboam's rebellion against God impact the nation for generations to come? What does this teach us about the importance of the decisions we make in life?
- Will your faith be passed on to the generations to come?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to forgive you for the sins of your past and the negative impact those sins have had on others.
- Ask God to heal the effect of your sins on the lives of those who have been hurt by them.
- Ask God to help you to have a positive impact on the people He brings along your path.
- Take a moment to pray that the true faith will be passed on to the next generation and that God would continue to be honoured in their lives for years to come.

Chapter 12 - The Priesthood in the Southern Kingdom of Judah

We have seen that the northern kingdom of Israel abandoned the Levitical priesthood and under King Jeroboam, established their own religion, worshipping two golden calves. This decision immediately placed the Levites living in Israel in danger. 2 Chronicles 11 tells us that this resulted in these men leaving Israel and settling in the southern kingdom of Judah where they could continue to minister.

14 For the Levites left their common lands and their holdings and came to Judah and Jerusalem, because Jeroboam and his sons cast them out from serving as priests of the Lord, 15 and he appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat idols and for the calves that he had made. 16 And those who had set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel came after them from all the tribes of Israel to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord, the God of their fathers. 17 They strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and for three years they made Rehoboam the son of Solomon secure, for they walked for three years in the way of David and Solomon. (2 Chronicles 11)

Notice that these priests from Israel strengthened the kingdom of Judah because they were devoted to the ways of the Lord God. This set the nation of Judah off on the right track, but it also created a great tension between Israel and Judah.

When Rehoboam, king of Judah died, his son Abijah became king in his place. 2 Chronicles 13:2 tells us that there was war between Jeroboam of Israel and Abijah of Judah. On one occasion Abijah of Judah went out to fight Jeroboam. Standing on Mount Zemaraim in the hill country of Ephraim, he spoke to the people of Israel:

8 "And now you think to withstand the kingdom of the Lord in the hand of the sons of David, because you are a great multitude and have with you the golden calves that Jeroboam made you for gods. 9 Have you not driven out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made priests for yourselves like the peoples of other lands? Whoever comes for ordination with a young bull or seven rams becomes a priest of what are not gods. 10 But as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken him. We have priests ministering to the Lord who are sons of Aaron, and Levites for their service." (2 Chronicles 13)

King Abijah reminded the people of Israel that they had driven out the true priests of the Lord from their land. Judah, however, had remained faithful to the Lord God by not forsaking the Levitical priests and the sons of Aaron. As Abijah prepared for battle against Jeroboam, the Levitical priests were present. When Jeroboam attacked Judah, it was the Levitical priests who sounded the trumpets to call the men of Judah to battle. Abijah was victorious over

Jeroboam and killed 500,000 Israelites in that terrible battle (see 2 Chronicles 13:17).

The nation of Judah continued to generally serve the Lord under the reign of Ahijah and his son Asa, although there were also those who worshipped other gods. When Jehoshaphat came to the throne he would remove these foreign gods from Judah (see 2 Chronicles 17:6). By the third year of his reign, Jehoshaphat had sent the Levitical priests throughout the land with the Book of the Law. These priests acted as traveling teachers of the law of God. The result of these reforms and the faithful teaching of the Word of God on the part of the priests is seen in 2 Chronicles 17:10:

10 And the fear of the LORD fell upon all the kingdoms of the land that were around Judah, and they made no war against Jehoshaphat. (2 Chronicles 17)

Jehoshaphat would also appoint the Levites and priests as judges. They would counsel the people of Judah in the ways of the Lord in cases of civil disputes. Listen to the king's command to these Levites and priests as they exercised this role as judges in Judah:

9 And he charged them: "Thus you shall do in the fear of the LORD, in faithfulness, and with your whole heart." (2 Chronicles 19)

The king expected that the priests to judge the people wholeheartedly in faithfulness and in the fear of the Lord. The king expected his priests to be true men of God.

In the years following the death of Jehoshaphat, Judah would wander from the faith of their fathers. This rebellion

was led by the kings who came after him. Under Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat, pagan shrines cropped up throughout the land and Judah began to turn from the truth of God.

It was a priest by the name of Jehoiada who would break this rebellion against God by standing up against the evil Queen Athaliah who was ruling in Judah at the time. With the help of the army he was successful in removing her from the throne and having her killed (see 2 Kings 11:1-16). In her place, a seven-year-old by the name of Jehoash became king.

The priest Jehoiada took a special interest in king Jehoash and acted as an adviser to him. 2 Kings 12:2 describes King Jehoash in this way:

2 And Jehoash did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all his days, because Jehoiada the priest instructed him. (2 Kings 12)

We see here the teaching and counselling role that Jehoiada the priest had in those days and how this impacted the king and the decisions he made. The nation of Judah had been moving away from God and toward foreign gods since the death of Jehoshaphat. Jehoiada the priests had a powerful impact on the spiritual climate of the nation, ministering through king Jehoash.

2 Kings 12 describes the reforms that took place during the reign of Jehoash under the counsel of Jehoiada the priest. Under the reign of Jehoshaphat, worship at the temple was being ignored. King Jehoash commissioned the priests to take the offerings that had been donated to the Lord and use them to repair the temple (2 Kings 12:4-5). For a period of time the priests had neglected their duties

in the work of the temple. Through the influence of Jehoash and Jehoiada the temple was repaired and worship re-established in Judah.

After the death of Jehoiada, Joash, influenced by his political friends, abandoned the temple. Jehoiada's son Zechariah the priest rebuked the king for turning from God (see 2 Chronicles 24:20). The king became so angry at this confrontation that he ordered that Zechariah the priest be stoned to death. Zechariah, the priest, was killed because he dared to confront the king with his sin. This shows us that there were in Judah priests who would stand up for the truth of God even if it meant losing their lives.

This same boldness is seen again when King Uzziah began his reign in Judah. In his pride, Uzziah decided that he would go into the temple to burn incense to the Lord. Azariah, the priest, however, along with eighty fellow priests, boldly stood up to the king and told him that he had no right to burn this incense in the house of the Lord:

17 But Azariah the priest went in after him, with
eighty priests of the Lord who were men of valor,
18 and they withstood King Uzziah and said to him,
"It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the
Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are
consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary,
for you have done wrong, and it will bring you
no honor from the Lord God." (2 Chronicles 26)

This was a bold action on the part of the priests, especially in light of the death of Zechariah but it again shows us that these priests of Judah were faithful to their responsibilities before God and were willing to risk their lives for His cause.

There appears to be constant spiritual battle going on in the history of the southern kingdom of Judah. We have seen the death of Zechariah and the boldness of Azariah and his fellow priests to stand up against the evil of the day. We have also seen how the kings of the nation were tempted to pride and rebellion against God.

Under the leadership of King Ahaz, the influence of evil in Judah was felt in a very powerful way. 2 Chronicles 28 describes this king of Judah:

2 but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even made metal images for the Baals, 3 and he made offerings in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. 4 And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree. (2 Chronicles 28)

In fact, 2 Chronicles 28:24-25 goes on to tell us that Ahaz broke the utensils used in the house of the Lord and shut the doors of the temple. He also made pagan altars in the land and offered sacrifices to foreign gods. During his reign, it appears that the temple was ignored and the worship of God ceased. We are not told what the priests did in those days. Obviously, they were forbidden to lead the people in the worship of the true God. We can only imagine how this must have grieve the heart of God.

Under the leadership of King Hezekiah, worship of God would once again be restored. In order for this to take place, Hezekiah opened the doors of the temple that his father had closed (2 Chronicles 29:3). Listen to the words

of King Hezekiah to the priests of his day as recorded for us in 2 Chronicles 29:

4 He summoned the priests and Levites to meet him at the courtyard east of the Temple. 5 He said to them, "Listen to me, you Levites! Purify yourselves, and purify the Temple of the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Remove all the defiled things from the sanctuary. 6 Our ancestors were unfaithful and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord our God. They abandoned the Lord and his dwelling place; they turned their backs on him. 7 They also shut the doors to the Temple's entry room, and they snuffed out the lamps. They stopped burning incense and presenting burnt offerings at the sanctuary of the God of Israel. 8 "That is why the Lord's anger has fallen upon Judah and Jerusalem. He has made them an object of dread, horror, and ridicule, as you can see with your own eyes. 9 Because of this, our fathers have been killed in battle, and our sons and daughters and wives have been captured. 10 But now I will make a covenant with the Lord, the God of Israel, so that his fierce anger will turn away from us. 11 My sons, do not neglect your duties any longer! The Lord has chosen you to stand in his presence, to minister to him, and to lead the people in worship and present offerings to him." (2 Chronicles 29)

Hezekiah not only wanted to cleanse the temple, he also wanted the priests and Levites to consecrate themselves and return to their God-given duties.

Under the direction of King Hezekiah, the priests and the Levites began the process of cleansing the temple. For sixteen days, these men worked tirelessly to cleanse it and

prepare it for the worship of God once again. We can only imagine the condition of neglect the temple must have been in that it took these men sixteen days to clean it. Again, this shows us that the priests had seriously neglected their duties during the reign of Ahaz.

With the temple restored and purified, Hezekiah commanded the priests to return to their responsibilities. 2 Chronicles 29:20-36 describes the first day that these priests returned to work. It was a day of great celebration, sacrifices and music as the worship of God was restored in the southern Kingdom of Judah. The offerings made that day were so numerous that there were not enough priests to sacrifice them. 2 Chronicles 29:34 tells us the reason for this:

34 But there were too few priests to prepare all the burnt offerings. So their relatives the Levites helped them until the work was finished and more priests had been purified, for the Levites had been more conscientious about purifying themselves than the priests had been. (2 Chronicles 29)

“The Levites had been more conscientious about purifying themselves than the priests had been.” The priests, who should have been leading the way, were slow in making themselves right with God. This shows us that they had been influenced by the evil of the day and had compromised in their commitment to God.

The slowness of the priests to consecrate themselves is also seen in 2 Chronicles 30 when the Passover was celebrated. Normally the Passover would be celebrated on the fourteenth day of the first month. King Hezekiah, however, decided to celebrate it on the second month of the year in order to have adequate time to prepare:

2 The king, his officials, and all the community of Jerusalem decided to celebrate Passover a month later than usual. 3 They were unable to celebrate it at the prescribed time because not enough priests could be purified by then, and the people had not yet assembled at Jerusalem.

Not enough priests had been purified to celebrate such an important event. The people had to wait until the priests were right with God again. What a sad picture this presents of the spiritual leadership of the nation of Judah. They could not lead the people in worship because they were not right with God themselves. The spiritual decline of the priesthood in these days is quite evident. Under the capable leadership of King Hezekiah these priests were restored to their place and continued the worship of God in the land.

The decline of the spiritual life was not only evident in the lives of the priests and Levites but also among the people. 2 Chronicles 31 describe two details that needed to be corrected in those days.

First, in the absence of faithful priests in the temple of God, the people had turned to other gods. 2 Chronicles 31:1 tells us that the people needed to get right with God. As the worship of God was restored, the people went out into the land and broke to pieces the pagan altars they had built when the temple was closed.

The second detail that needed to be addressed in those days was the care of the priests. It appears that the people in those days were no longer contributing to the work of the temple. This meant that the priests were no longer being paid for their duties. Hezekiah addresses this matter in 2 Chronicles 31:4:

4 And he commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites, that they might give themselves to the Law of the Lord. (2 Chronicles 31)

2 Chronicles 31:11-19 describes how the king appointed certain priests to take charge over the tithes and offerings of the people. Other Levites were charged with the responsibility of taking these offerings to the various cities where their brothers were serving the Lord so that they could be paid for their work in order that their responsibilities would not suffer. King Hezekiah did much to restore the priesthood and their functions in Judah during his reign.

The renewal that took place under King Hezekiah did not last. In the fourteen years that followed his reign under the reigns of King Manasseh and King Amon, the nation of Judah would again return to their foreign gods. Once again, the temple was abandoned and the priests turned from their responsibilities. We catch a glimpse of this neglect by the time King Josiah came to the throne. Josiah was a righteous king who wanted to worship the Lord. Like King Hezekiah before him, however, he had much work to do if the worship of God was to be restored. 2 Chronicles 34 tells us that one of the first duties of the king was to get rid of the foreign idols that had cropped up in the land (see 2 Chronicles 34:1-7).

The second responsibility of King Josiah was to cleanse the temple. Not only did the temple need to be cleansed of its impurities, but there were significant repairs that needed to take place. Listen to the description of the repairs to the temple in the days of King Josiah:

10 He entrusted the money to the men assigned to supervise the restoration of the Lord's Temple.

Then they paid the workers who did the repairs and renovation of the Temple. 11 They hired carpenters and builders, who purchased finished stone for the walls and timber for the rafters and beams. They restored what earlier kings of Judah had allowed to fall into ruin. 12 The workers served faithfully under the leadership of Jahath and Obadiah, Levites of the Merarite clan, and Zechariah and Meshullam, Levites of the Kohathite clan. Other Levites, all of whom were skilled musicians, 13 were put in charge of the laborers of the various trades. Still others assisted as secretaries, officials, and gatekeepers. (2 Chronicles 34)

Notice that they had to hire carpenters and builders to make the repairs necessary on the temple. These workers had to purchase finished stone for the walls and timber for the rafters. These repairs were significant and indicate that the temple was in serious disrepair. The temple structure had been neglected. Remember that it was the duty of the Levites to care for the temple. This responsibility had been ignored in those days.

As the repairs were taking place on the temple, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of Moses (see 2 Chronicles 34:14). It appears that this book had been lost for years. When the book was taken to King Josiah and read in his presence, the king saw how far the nation of Judah had wandered from God. Josiah ripped his clothes in a sign of deep grief over this matter because he understood that the nation was under the judgement of God.

The priests had ignored their obligations before God in those years. They were responsible to teach the Word of God and walk in obedience to the Law of God as given through Moses. They did not even know where the Book

of the Law was during that time. The people of God were not being instructed in the truth of God's Word. These priests had clearly neglected their duties.

Convicted by the words of the Book of the Law, Josiah encouraged His people to return to the worship of the one true God. For a period of time there appeared to be a revival of worship and commitment to God.

This revival would not last. In the years following the death of Josiah, a series of kings would reign in Judah who ignored the Book of the Law of Moses. God sent Babylon against Judah and a number of these kings would be taken captive and brought into exile to Babylon. Under the reign of King Zedekiah, we catch a glimpse of the state of the priesthood in those final days of Judah as a nation:

14 All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nation. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem. (2 Chronicles 36)

The priests were unfaithful to God, following the ways of the nations around them. Those who had been given the responsibility to care for the temple "polluted the house of the LORD". In His anger, the Lord poured out His judgment upon them.

17 Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. 18 And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the

treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. 19 And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. 20 He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia (2 Chronicles 36)

The young men of Judah were killed in the temple of God. The holy vessels of the house of God the Levites had been given responsibility to care for were taken away into Babylon. The temple of God was burned and those who had not been killed were forced to leave Judah and taken into exile in Babylon. The house of God and the nation He had given them was abandoned. They lost everything because they neglected the Lord their God. The priests of God had failed in their responsibility of leading the people to walk in God's ways and teach their people the truth of their responsibilities before their God.

For Consideration:

- Under King Ahijah, Judah boasted to Israel that she had not abandoned the Levitical priesthood and the ways of the Lord God. As years would pass, however, we see that she too fell into sin and turned from her God. What does this teach us about how we can fall despite how strong we feel? How important is it that we be always watchful in our spiritual lives?

- Under the leadership of King Jehoshaphat, King Hezekiah and King Josiah, the worship of God was restored. Soon after their reigns, however, the nation fell back into sin and rebellion against God. What does this teach us about the natural tendency of the heart in spiritual matters?
- The priests Jehoiada and Azariah dared to confront the evil of their day and stood up for the truth of God and the Law of Moses. Are there spiritual leaders of our day who have this boldness?
- In the days of Hezekiah, when renewal was taking place in Judah, the priests were not ready to lead the people in this renewal because they themselves were unclean and needed to get right with God. Are there things you need to get right with God today? Are you a spiritual leader? Are you ready to lead your people into renewal?
- Judah was guilty of ignoring her responsibility before God by not providing for the priests. Are there servants of God who are being ignored today and struggling to do their ministry because God's people are not providing them the resources?
- Under the reforms of Josiah, we discover that the Book of the Law of Moses was lost and the people of God were not being instructed in the Word of God and His ways. It is possible that this sin is being repeated in churches of our nations today? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to realize how easily you could fall in your spiritual life. Ask Him to give you strength to face the temptations that come your way.
- Ask the Lord to give you the boldness and courage to stand up for what is true even when those around you have abandoned the truth of God and His purpose.
- Ask the Lord to show you any area of your life where you are not surrendered to Him. Ask Him to give you grace to walk in greater obedience.
- Ask God to show you how you can better use your resources to further the cause of His kingdom on this earth.
- Take a moment to pray for the spiritual leaders in your church and community. Ask God to help them to be diligent and faithful students of His Word. Ask God to give them grace to teach that truth to those under their charge.

Chapter 13 - The Priesthood During the Exile

We have seen that the nations of Israel and Judah both turned against the Lord. God punished them by taking them away from their land. Israel was the first to be exiled and stripped of her land when the Assyrians invaded. 2 Kings 17 tells us that the king of Assyria resettled the region of Israel with people from many lands:

24 And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities. (2 Kings 17)

2 Kings 17:25 records for us what took place that day when these foreigners, who did not follow the Lord, settled in the land of Israel:

25 And at the beginning of their dwelling there, they did not fear the Lord. Therefore, the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them. (2 Kings 17)

The curse of the Lord was on those who inhabited the region of Israel because they did not serve Him. The Assyrians had enough discernment to understand this, and sent

priests back to the region to teach the people how to worship the God of Israel.

27 Then the king of Assyria commanded, "Send there one of the priests whom you carried away from there, and let him go and dwell there and teach them the law of the god of the land." 28 So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and lived in Bethel and taught them how they should fear the Lord. (2 Kings 17)

The priests who returned to the northern kingdom to instruct the foreigners in the ways of the Lord, however, were not faithful to God. 2 Kings 17:29 tells us that each of the nations who had settled in the region continued to make their own gods and serve them. The result was a mixture of pagan and Jewish practices.

29 But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities in which they lived. 30 The men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the men of Cath made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, 31 and the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. 32 They also feared the Lord and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. 33 So they feared the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away.

While the priests of Israel were present in the land, the practice of child sacrifice, and the building of shrines to foreign gods in the high places continued. These priests had not learned their lesson but continued to compromise and walk in rebellion against the Lord and His purpose for them.

The nation of Judah to the south would also be stripped of her land because of rebellion. By the time of Judah's rebellion, Assyria had been conquered by the Babylonians who were on the move acquiring territory for their empire. Nebuchadnezzar and his army came to Jerusalem and captured it during the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah (2 Kings 25:1-2). The Babylonians entered the city of Jerusalem and burnt down the king's house along with many other homes in the city. They also burnt down the temple of God (2 Kings 25:9). The inhabitants of Jerusalem were taken to Babylon. Only the poorest in the land were permitted to remain in the city. Articles of any value in the temple of the Lord were pulled down and taken to Babylon for the king's treasury. The high priest of the temple at that time was a man by the name of Seraiah. He was taken to Babylon where he was put to death (see 2 Kings 25:18-20).

The land God had promised to His people was left barren for a period of seventy years. An entire generation would pass before this land would be restored to God's people. These were difficult days for the people of God from both Israel and Judah. We read very little about the priests and their role in these days. God, however, had not abandoned his people. He raised up people of tremendous significance during this time. God chose Esther from among the Jewish refugees to become queen of Persia. She would be responsible for saving her people from extermination under the evil plot of Haman, second in command in the

Persian empire. He placed Daniel in a significant position where he would speak prophetic words from God and demonstrate His power to the kings of the Medes and Persians. While these individuals were not priests, God was using them nonetheless.

We catch a glimpse of this period of exile in Hosea 3. In this passage, the prophet's wife was unfaithful and left him. God asked Hosea, her husband, to bring her back to his home and love her as God loved His people who were unfaithful to Him. This is a picture of what would happen to the people of God who had been unfaithful and separated themselves from God. Listen to what the Lord says through Hosea in this context:

4 For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. 5 Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days. (Hosea 3)

Notice what Hosea tells us here. The people of God would have to do without the ministry of the priests for a period of time. Eventually, the people of Israel would return to their God and serve Him. This seems to indicate that during this time of exile, the priests and sacrifices were no longer available to the people.

While the people of God in exile were separated from His full blessing on their lives, they were not abandoned. God would raise up a prophet/priest by the name of Jeremiah to minister to His people in those days.

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests of Anathoth (Jeremiah 1:1). As a prophet and priest, Jeremiah warned the people of Judah about the coming exile, but they refused to listen (see Jeremiah 25:1-5). In fact, Jeremiah's life was often threatened because he continued to warn the people of the coming devastation under Nebuchadnezzar. Even his fellow priests rejected him and sought to kill him because of his warnings:

11 Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, "This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your ears. (Jeremiah 26)

When the exile did come as Jeremiah had predicted, he would write to the exiles in Babylon with the word of the Lord:

4 "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. (Jeremiah 29)

Jeremiah challenged the people to settle in the land and make the best of their situation. He told them that their exile would last for seventy years (see Jeremiah 29:10). There were prophets among them who were speaking falsehood in the name of the Lord. Jeremiah warned the people about listening to these false prophets (see Jeremiah 29:8-9). He reminded the people that when the seventy years were over, God would return to them, restore

their fortunes and bring them back to the land He had promised their fathers (see Jeremiah 29:10-14). As a priest, Jeremiah spoke to his people in the name of the Lord and directed them in His way during this time of exile.

Jeremiah would remain in Jerusalem after it was captured (see Jeremiah 39:11-14). While the temple was burned and the articles of the temple taken into exile, Jeremiah would continue to bring the word of the Lord to those who were still in the land.

When the governor appointed by Babylon was murdered in Judah, the people who remained in the land feared that Babylon would retaliate. Fearing for their lives, they approached Jeremiah seeking the will of the Lord (see Jeremiah 42:1-6). Jeremiah consulted the Lord for these people and told them that it was the will of the Lord that they remain in the land. God would deliver them from the hand of their enemy (see Jeremiah 42:7-11). The people did not like this idea of staying in the land of Judah. They continued to fear for their lives and decided to ignore the word of God through the priest and flee to Egypt for protection (Jeremiah 43:1-7). Jeremiah was taken with them into Egypt where he continued to speak the word of the Lord to them even in their rebellion.

The role of priest was very limited during the time of the exile. The priests, who were sent by the king of Assyria to teach the people who had settled in Israel, did not seem to have the spiritual strength to stand up against the pagan worship of the day.

With the destruction of the temple in the southern kingdom and the removal of the articles used in worship, the role of the priests in exile would change. No longer were they able

to perform their regular duties. For an entire generation, the worship of God would be restricted.

God continued to speak to and use key individuals at this time. Men and women like Esther, Daniel, and Jeremiah were powerful figures used by God during the exile, but with the destruction of the temple, the formal function of the priest seems to have been abandoned.

For Consideration:

- The king of Assyria sent priests to the northern kingdom, to teach the foreigners who had settled in the land the ways of God. How did these priests fail in their responsibility? Have we as the people of God ever missed opportunities because we were not prepared for the task God had set before us?
- God allowed for the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the removal of the holy articles. Foreigners took these sacred articles and were not punished by God for touching them. It appears that the glory of God had left the temple and the articles used for worship. Is it possible that the glory of God has left our churches today?
- How did God use Jeremiah as a priest and prophet during the time of the exile?
- God seems to strip away formal worship and sacrifice during this time in exile. While the formal worship of God was taken away, He did not

stop speaking to individuals and using them to accomplish His purpose. What encouragement do you find in this fact?

For Prayer

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to always be ready for the opportunities He brings your way? Ask for boldness to stand firm in the truth.
- Do you know something of the glory of the Lord present in your life and in your church? Ask God to reveal His glory in a deeper way.
- Thank the Lord for men and women of faith who risk their lives, like Jeremiah, to speak the truth of God. Ask God to give you courage to stand alone, if need be, for the glory of His name.
- Thank the Lord that while the enemy may strip away our freedom to worship formally, he cannot limit our experience of God and His grace.

Chapter 14 - The Priesthood and the Return from Exile

As predicted by Jeremiah the priest and prophet, the people of God remained in exile for a period of seventy years. At the end of those seventy years, the Lord moved in a miraculous way in the life of Cyrus, king of Persia. In the first year of the reign of King Cyrus, he proclaimed the release of the Jewish population held in captivity. Listen to his proclamation in Ezra 1:

2 “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”
(Ezra 1)

The Lord God spoke to this pagan king and called him to release the Jewish nation and send them back to their land to rebuild the temple.

God also stirred up the hearts of the people of Israel and they contributed generously toward this great project (see Ezra 1:5-6). Ezra 2:64 tells us that 42,360 Jews would return to Jerusalem, along with their servants and cattle. Among them were 973 priests and many Levites (see Ezra 2:36-42).

The book of Ezra gives an account of individuals by the name of Habaiah, Kakkoz and Barzillai who could not prove that their family line was traced back to the line of priests. As a result, they were excluded from the priesthood until these matters could be proven (see Ezra 2:61-63). If they were truly belonging to the priestly line, one would have thought that this would have been understood. Obviously, it has been some time since their family had been involved in any priestly activity.

Upon arrival in Israel, the priests built an altar and offered sacrifices to the Lord God, who had brought them back to their land (see Ezra 3:1-3). As the people settled in the land again after seventy years of exile, they began the process of reconstruction. The people focused primarily on building their own homes while the temple of the Lord remained in ruins.

The Lord would send a prophet by the name of Haggai to governor Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest confronting them about ignoring the work of the temple:

1 In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2 "Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the

house of the Lord.” 3 Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 4 “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? (Haggai 1)

Joshua the high priest had neglected his duty to oversee the construction of the temple and had to be reprimanded for this. His priorities were not God’s priorities.

With the words of Haggai fresh in their minds, the people of God confessed their sin and set to work on the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. They persevered despite opposition from their neighbours, and completed the work God had given them to do. Ezra 6:16-18 tells us that the priests and Levites dedicated the restored temple to the Lord “with joy”. A great number of sacrifices were made the day of the dedication of this temple. Ezra 6:18 remind us that all this was done “as it is written in the Book of Moses.”

The priests of that day were involved in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem that would protect her from her enemies. Nehemiah 3:1 tells us that Eliashib the high priest built the Sheep Gate. Other priests were involved in the repair of other sections of the wall (see Nehemiah 3:22).

Problems arose among those who returned from exile. We read in Nehemiah 5 that some of those who returned had very little. Eventually they were forced to borrow from their neighbours just to survive. The richer Jews of the day demanded high interest on the money loaned, and this increased the burden on the poor. When Nehemiah found out about this, he rebuked the lenders and told these individuals to return what they had taken from their poorer brothers and sisters. The priests were called on to oversee this process (see Ezra 5:12).

Ezra and Nehemiah encountered several problems in those days. Ezra 9, for example, speaks of how the Levites had not separated themselves from the people of the land and their sinful practices. They had been guilty of marrying foreign women (see Ezra 9:1-2). As a priest, concerned for the glory of God, Ezra was deeply ashamed of this sin among the Levites and he cried out to God:

6 "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens." (Ezra 9)

Ezra would lead these Levites in a prayer of confession for their unfaithfulness.

Another problem occurred when a priest by the name of Eliashib cleared out a storeroom in the temple and offered it as living quarters for a relative (Nehemiah 13:4-5). These storerooms were dedicated to the Lord and the storage of tithes and offerings. Eliashib defiled the space by offering it to his relative. Listen to the response of Nehemiah when he discovered this sin:

7 ... I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. 8 And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. 9 Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense. (Nehemiah 13)

Nehemiah threw Tobiah out of the room and had it cleansed and restored to its proper use. Eliashib was guilty of disrespecting the temple. He ignored the law of God and

used his influence to provide accommodations for his relative.

Nehemiah discovered that in those days the Levites were not being properly paid for their services. He confronted the people about this and appointed treasurers to make sure that the priests and Levites were receiving their pay (see Nehemiah 13:10-14).

Ezra was a priest from the family of Aaron. He returned from exile to the city of Jerusalem. Ezra 7:6 describes him as a man who was “skilled in the Law of Moses.” As a priest, skilled in the law of Moses, Ezra had three main goals in life:

10 For Ezra set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. (Ezra 7)

Ezra studied the law of God, he lived the Law of God in his personal life. He also taught the Law of God so that others would walk in obedience as well. Ezra is an example of a priest who was devoted to his calling in the days of Israel's return from exile. We have an example of Ezra's teaching in Nehemiah 8. On this occasion Ezra read the Law of Moses to the people. As he read the Law, certain Levites circulated throughout the group helping the people to understand what was being read (see Nehemiah 8:7-8). The result of this teaching was that the people were deeply touched. Nehemiah 8:9 tells us that “the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.” When the people left that day, they rejoiced, “because they had understood the words that were declared to them.”

Nehemiah continues:

13 On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priest and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law.

Under Ezra the priest, there appears to be a renewal of interest in the teaching of the Word of God. In fact, on one occasion the people gathered to confess their sins. For a quarter of the day they stood listening to the reading of the Book of the Law of the Lord (see Nehemiah 9:3). After hearing the Word, they spend another quarter of the day confessing their sin and worshipping the Lord (Nehemiah 9:3). These were days of renewal for the people of Israel as God opened their heart to the teaching of Ezra and the other priests.

In those days Levites were commissioned to oversee the contributions and offerings given by the people for the work of the Lord. The tithes and offerings were gathered and taken to storerooms of the temple (see Nehemiah 12:44).

The people of Israel appeared to be motivated to give to the work of the Lord:

47 And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron. (Nehemiah 12)

The renewal of the priesthood under Ezra and Nehemiah did not last. The prophet Malachi, who prophesied after Ezra and Nehemiah, addressed the priests of his day in Malachi 1:6:

6 “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? Says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’” (Malachi 1)

Malachi confronted the priests of his day and told them that they had despised the name of the Lord. The response of the priests to his accusation is equally as surprising as the accusation itself: “How have we despised your name?” These priests did not seem to understand how they were misrepresenting the name of the Lord. They did not have enough knowledge of the requirements of the Law of Moses to understand their failures.

God would go on to remind the priests that they were offering polluted food on His altar. The animals they offered were blind, lame and sick. (see Malachi 1:7-8). They were not offering the best they had, but what they did not want themselves.

The Lord continued his accusation against the priests in Malachi 1:

11 For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. 12 But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. 13 But you say, ‘What a weariness this is,’ and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that

from your hand? says the Lord. 14 Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. (Malachi 1)

Notice what God told the priests here. He reminded them that while His name was great among the nations, these priests had profaned it (Malachi 1:11). They considered the work He had called them to do to be a “weariness” (Malachi 1:13). They offered to the Lord sacrifices that were taken by violence or were lame and sick (Malachi 1:13). In doing so they were profaning the name of the God of Israel.

The Lord told the priests of Malachi’s day that if they did not repent, His curse would fall upon them:

1 “And now, O priests, this command is for you. 2 If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. 3 Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. 4 So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 2)

Just as they had profaned the name of the Lord, so He would profane their name. God would curse them for their profanity and blasphemy. They would be stripped of their duties.

It did not take long for the priests and Levites to turn away from God. Even though they had returned from exile and were again settled in their land, there was within the hearts of these priests a tendency to wander from God and misrepresent Him before the people. Those who were appointed to lead the people into a relationship with God were themselves sinners in need of a priest to lead them.

As we conclude our reflection on the priesthood after the return from exile, it is important that we consider one more prophet who lived at this time. Zechariah the prophet shared a vision he had about Joshua who was high priest during the reconstruction of the temple (see Haggai 1:1-2). In Zechariah's vision, the prophet saw Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD with Satan standing at his right side to bring accusations against him (see Zechariah 3:1). The Lord rebuked Satan and commanded the angel to take off Joshua's filthy clothes and clothe him with "pure vestments" (Zechariah 3:4). This action was symbolic of the Lord forgiving Joshua. The fact that Joshua the priest was clothed in filthy garments is an indication that he had not kept himself pure but needed to get right with the Lord. God was about to do a wonderful work, but the high priest stood before Him in filthy clothes, unprepared to follow the Lord in the work He wanted to do. This is a picture of the frailty and sinfulness of the earthly priests.

As Joshua stood before the Lord, in Zechariah's vision, the Lord spoke to him and gave him a promise:

8 Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. 9 For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of

hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. (Zechariah 3)

Notice the promise that God made here. He told Joshua that the day was coming when he would bring to earth a servant called the Branch. Through the Branch, the iniquity of the land would be removed in a single day. This would have been very difficult for Joshua to understand. What is important for us to note here, however, is that the name “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua.” The Branch that would come to remove the iniquity of the land in a single day would bear the name of Joshua. He would become a true high priest who would deal with this matter of sin once and for all.

In Zechariah 6 the Lord told Zechariah the prophet to take an offering from the exiles who had returned from Babylon. He was to take the silver and gold he received and make a crown. That crown was then to be placed on the head of Joshua the high priest. When the crown was placed on his head, Zechariah was to say to Joshua:

12 “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. 13 It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.’” (Zechariah 6)

The words of this prophecy speak again about the Branch who would remove the iniquity of the land in a single day. This Branch (the Messiah—the Lord Jesus), would build a temple. He would sit and rule on His throne as priest. Priests do not normally sit on thrones and rule but there

was a day coming when a new priest would not only bring the forgiveness of sin in a day, but also rule as priest and king over those who had been forgiven of their sin. This prophecy of Zechariah, looked forward to the priesthood of Christ, who would be the perfect High Priest.

While there was a brief renewal of the priesthood after the exile in the days of Ezra, that renewal did not last. By the time we reach the end of the Old Testament, the priests of God saw their work to be a weariness. They were guilty of despising the name of the Lord and like Joshua, dressed in filthy clothes. These priests were unable to deal with even their own sins.

For Consideration

- How does God use the foreign king, Cyrus, to bless His people? Can God use unbelievers to advance His purpose?
- When the people returned from exile they began to rebuild the city but ignored the construction of the temple. Haggai challenged them in this matter. What do the priorities of the priests in those days tell us about where they were in their walk with God? Take a moment to examine your priorities in life.
- Eliashib the priests used his influence to find a room in the temple for his relative Tobiah. Why was this wrong? Is it possible for religious leaders to misuse their influence today?

- What was the impact of the teaching of the Word of God under Ezra? Can the teaching of the Word bring this kind of change today?
- Did the renewal that took place under Ezra and Nehemiah continue? What was the challenge of Malachi to the priests of his day? What does this tell us about the frailty of the priests and their sinful nature?
- How does Zechariah prophecy about the Lord Jesus? What would Jesus the priest do for His people that the priests of the Old Testament could not do?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is not limited to using believers to accomplish His purpose on this earth. Thank Him for the way He used Cyrus to release His people from bondage.
- Ask the Lord to give you His priorities for your life. Ask Him to forgive you for times when you have failed to live with His priorities.
- Are you a leader with influence in your church or community? Ask the Lord to help you to be wise in how you exercise that authority.
- Take a moment to thank God that He sent His Son, Jesus, to be the perfect High Priest for us.

Chapter 15 – The Priesthood in the Time of Jesus

In the last chapter, we saw how there appeared to a renewal among the priests in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. This renewal, however, did not last. In the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi rebuked the priests who had become negligent in their duties and saw the work of God as a burden rather than a delight.

We come now to the priests of the New Testament, and particularly those who lived in the time Jesus walked on the earth. Remember that Zechariah the prophet had prophesied that a Branch would come who would cleanse the iniquity of the land in a single day, and rule as a priestly king on His throne (Zechariah 3). This prophesy of Zechariah pointed directly to the Lord Jesus as the promised Messiah and hope of the nation. What was the response of the religious leaders and particularly the priests to the arrival of this righteous Branch?

As we begin, we discover that at the birth of Jesus, wise men came from eastern lands to worship him. When they asked King Herod about where this child was born, he assembled the chief priests and scribes to inquire about this matter (Matthew 2:4).

Notice the reference to the scribes here in Matthew 2:4. While they were not priests, the scribes were students of the Law of Moses. It was these scribes who interpreted the law and gave instructions about its application in the lives of the people. Because the Scribes were students of the Law, Herod called them along with the priests to answer his question about the king who was to be born. The priests and scribes pointed Herod to the prophecy of Micah 5:2:

2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days. (Micah 5)

It is significant that the priests were aware of the prophecy that a king would come from the small and seemingly insignificant region of Bethlehem. That word of prophecy pointed the wise men to the very town where Jesus was born.

The New Testament gives us a glimpse into the role of the priests at this time. We read in Matthew 8:1-4, for example, how, after Jesus healed a leper He gave him a very particular command:

4 And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded for a proof to them. (Matthew 8)

Jesus encouraged this leper to go to the priest to be declared pure according to the Law of Moses.

While these priests performed their duties, according to the Law of Moses, Jesus saw beyond the external actions to the heart of these men. He told a parable about a man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. On his way, he was robbed, beaten and left on the road half dead. Notice the response of the priest who saw this man:

31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. (Luke 10)

It is significant that Jesus would use a priest in his parable. The priest in Jesus' illustration was so concerned for his purity that he refused to minister to those in need.

On another occasion Jesus told a parable about a man who planted a vineyard and rented it out to tenants. In the season of the harvest he called his servants to harvest the grapes from the vines. When the tenants saw these servants coming to harvest the grapes, they killed them. Eventually, the master sent his son to speak to them, but the tenants killed his son also. Clearly this parable spoke of Jesus and how He, as the Son of God, was rejected by the people of His day. Notice the response of the priests upon hearing Jesus' story:

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. 46 And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet. (Matthew 21)

From this we understand that the priests did not like Jesus. Jesus saw through the outward religion to the attitude of their hearts. Their hearts were not right with God, whom they claimed to serve.

As the Lord Jesus ministered and preached to the crowds, many people began to wonder if he was the Messiah who had been prophesied. They were touched by his words. Many were healed from their sicknesses and delivered of their oppressive spirits. While the people wondered about these things, notice the response of the priests, according to John 10:

32 The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. (John 10)

The chief priests refused to accept that Jesus could be the Messiah. They rejected His message and even sought to stop Him from ministering to the people.

This rejection of Jesus and His message is quite clear after Jesus raised Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha from the dead (see John 11:38-44). Seeing the impact of this event on the crowds and how they were turning to Jesus as a result, the chief priests determined that they were going to kill Lazarus:

9 When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. (John 12)

It is quite amazing to see the chief religious leaders plotting the murder of an innocent man. This, however, was the heart of the priests who served in those days.

Mark 11:15-19 describes how Jesus went to the temple on one occasion. When he entered the outer court, he found money-changers and those who were selling animals for sacrifices. When He saw what was taking place that day, anger burnt within Him. What He was seeing was a defiling of the temple. This place that was meant for worship and prayer had become a place for commerce and profit. That day Jesus took it upon Himself to drive these sellers and money changers out of the temple.

The fact that these individuals were allowed in the temple courtyard for this purpose shows us the condition of the faith of the day. God had set apart the courtyard for the worship of His name. The priests and Levites were accountable to God to keep that courtyard and the temple free from defilement. They had not been doing their job. Notice, however, the response of the priests to the cleansing of the temple by Jesus:

18 And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. (Mark 11)

Again, we see here the state of the priesthood. They sought to kill Jesus because He kept the Law of Moses in cleansing the temple. These priests had compromised in their faith to such an extent that they no longer followed God's requirements.

This desire to get rid of Jesus would eventually become an obsession for the priests. Their concern, however, was to do so secretly, for they feared the people (see Luke 20:19; 22:2). Their desire was to look good to the people of the day. They had a reputation to maintain as religious leaders

and appearance was very important to them. Mark described this attitude when he said:

1 It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, 2 for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people." (Mark 14)

For these priests, the outward appearance was very important. In their heart, however, they harboured murderous thoughts about Jesus and those who followed Him.

The opportunity to arrest Jesus came when one of His disciples betrayed Him. Knowing that the priests were wanting to arrest and kill Jesus, Judas went to them with a proposal:

14 Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. 16 And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him. (Matthew 26)

The priests of that day were more than willing to pay Judas to deliver Jesus over to them. They paid him well for doing so. The day came when Judas found his opportunity. Gathering a mob around him, Judas arrived at the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was praying. It was there that they would arrest Jesus.

43 And immediately, while he was speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with

swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and elders. (Mark 14)

Notice that the mob arrived “from the chief priests and the scribes and elders.” The priests of Jesus’ day were behind His arrest.

Jesus was brought to the high priest and questioned about His teaching (see John 18:19). When Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, Caiaphas, the high priest, accused Him of blasphemy. Matthew’s account of this event is striking:

63 But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” 64 Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.” 67 Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, 68 saying, “Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?” (Matthew 26)

Upon declaring that Jesus had blasphemed, the high priest and those present declared that He deserved to die. This decision had been made, however, even before Jesus was arrested. These priests already wanted to kill Jesus before his trial. Notice what they did that day – they spat in Jesus face. They also struck Him and demanded that He prophesy and tell them who had struck Him. The high priest condemned the Messiah to death. He allowed those present that day to spit in Jesus’ face and mock Him. They, of

course, were the ones guilty of blasphemy. This was an all-time low for the priesthood—they rejected the very Son of God and openly mocked and persecuted Him.

As the trial of Jesus progressed, He was handed over to the Roman leaders, who had the authority to pronounce the death sentence. Notice that the chief priests were the ones who had Jesus bound and handed over to Pilate:

1 When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. 2 And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor. (Matthew 27)

Not only did the priests of that day hand Jesus over to Pilate but they were so intent on the death of Jesus that they also went along with Him to Pilate to bring their accusations:

1 And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate. 2 And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." 3 And the chief priests accused him of many things. 4 And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." (Mark 15)

Reading this account of the trial of Jesus, we cannot help but be struck by the fact that those who represented God before the people had so much hatred for Jesus that they would stand before the Roman governor and accuse Him.

They were not only responsible for Jesus' arrest, but they also took the lead in accusing Him before the authorities.

After Pilate beat Jesus, despite finding no guilt in Him, he presented Him to the people. We can only imagine what Jesus looked like after being beaten by the Roman soldiers. They had placed a crown of thorns on His head and spat in His face. They had beaten Him with a whip. Jesus stood before the crowd with spit and blood dripping off His body. Pilate had no reason to kill Jesus and likely hoped that this beating would have been sufficient to calm the crowd. Notice, however, the response of the priests to seeing Jesus that day:

4 Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." 5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" 6 When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." 7 (John 19)

Seeing Jesus in His humbled state, the chief priests led out in the cry, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" They had no compassion or love in their heart for Jesus. Pilate, uncertain as to what to do, decided to bring out a man who was accused of murder and rioting in the city and place him beside Jesus. He then asked the people to choose between Jesus and Barabbas. Notice the role of the priests in Matthew's account of this event:

20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. (Matthew 27)

Again, we see the chief priests leading the people in crying out for the death of Jesus the Messiah. There can be no doubt here that the priests of the day had a significant role to play in the death of Jesus.

When the Lord Jesus was finally crucified on the cross, the chief priests were present. Mark recounts what took place at the foot of the cross. Listen to the words of the priests to Jesus as He was hanging on the cross:

27 And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. 29 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. (Mark 15)

There at the foot of the cross of this dying man, the chief priests stood mocking Him saying, "He saved others; He cannot save himself." Their hatred of Jesus was so intense that even as He suffered on the cross they had nothing compassionate to say. They mocked Him to His very death.

When Pilate put a sign on the cross saying: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," it was the chief priests who approached Pilate and asked him to change it to say, "This man says, I am King of the Jews." Pilate refused to change this sign for them (see John 19:19-22). This was a reference to a spiritual kingdom. The chief priests could not

bear to see this sign because they rejected Jesus as their heavenly King. They went on record protesting this sign and its meaning.

Matthew goes on to tell us what happened after the death of Jesus when he was put in the tomb. Knowing that Jesus had predicted that He would rise from the death after three days, the chief priests approached Pilate with a request:

63 ... "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'
64 Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." (Matthew 27)

Notice that the priests called Jesus an impostor. Notice also that they spoke of the message of the Lord Jesus as a "fraud". These priests were so intent on stamping out the message of Christ that they requested a guard at his tomb for three days lest the disciples steal the body and continue the teaching of Christ.

When the resurrection did take place, despite the guard posted at the tomb, the priests found themselves in a difficult position. The guards present that day reported what they had seen to the chief priests. We can only imagine the impact that the resurrection of Jesus had on the guards. It was not the disciples who reported to the chief priests, but the unbelieving Roman authorities. The chief priests had no cause to reject the report of these Roman soldiers who cared nothing for Jesus.

Notice the response of the chief priests to the news of the miraculous resurrection of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 28:

11 While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. 12 And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers 13 and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. (Matthew 28)

The priests held a meeting and decided to take advantage of the situation the guards found themselves in. These guards had seemingly failed in their responsibility as the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb. This would have meant serious discipline or possibly even death for these soldiers for failing in their responsibility. The priests told the soldiers, therefore, to say that the disciples had come and stolen the body of Jesus while they were asleep. They paid these soldiers a great sum of money to tell this lie and promised to speak to the governor in their favour. We see the priest, here bribing the guards and spreading a lie to the population of that day. Not only were they guilty of murder but also of bribery and fraud as well.

As we examine the priesthood of the time of Jesus what do we discover? We see a spiritual leadership busy with all the externals of religion. They were doing the right things from a religious point of view but their hearts were

far from God. They were more concerned about what people thought about them than they were about what the Lord God thought about them. These priests, were dressed in their priestly garments but inside their hearts they were capable of the worst of crimes. They were filled with pride. Jesus described them as a people who would pass by a stranger beaten and robbed on the street without bending down to help. The record of the gospels shows us that they were very jealous people who hated the attention Jesus received. They saw the miracles of Jesus but hardened their heart to Him. They were willing to murder the Son of God. They paid Judas money to betray Him. They falsely accused Jesus before the Roman authorities. They persuaded the people of their day to reject Jesus the Messiah. They openly mocked Jesus as He hung dying on the cross. They paid off the Roman authorities to promote a lie and deceive the people about what really took place at the tomb. Ultimately, they were the instruments Satan used to kill the Son of God.

For Consideration:

- When Herod learned from the wise men that a king of the Jews had been born, he called for the scribes and priests and inquired as to where He would be born. The priests and scribes pointed out to him the very city. What does this tell us about the understanding of the priests of prophecy about the Messiah?
- While the priests of Jesus' day were faithful to the requirements of Moses and practiced their faith, what does Jesus tell us about them in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10?

- What was the reaction of the priests to the message of Jesus?
- In Mark 11 we read the story of how Jesus cleansed the temple. What was going on in the temple when Jesus cleansed it? What does this tell us about the priorities of the priests of that day?
- What was the role of the priests in the crucifixion of Jesus? What does this tell us about them?
- What do we learn here about the need of a new priesthood? How does the failure of the priests point us to the need of a new High Priest?
- Is it possible for us to appear religious on the outside and not be right with God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to apply what you know to be true from Scripture to your life. Ask that your faith would not be a faith of external actions only but one that touches your heart.
- Are there religious leaders in your community who do not know the Lord Jesus or accept Him as the Son of God? Take a moment to pray that they would turn to Him.
- The priests appeared to look good on the outside but inside they were very different. Ask the Lord to examine your heart to see if there is an-

anything offensive to Him. Pray that He would remove anything that offends and cleanse you from within.

- Thank the Lord that while people and religious leaders may fail us, He will never fail.

Chapter 16 - The Need of a New Priesthood

As we have traced the priestly line through the Scriptures it has become quite clear that there were problems in the priesthood. We have seen, among the priests, times of intense rebellion against God and His purpose. These men often fell and turned away from God. Hebrews 7:27-28 reminds us that when the priests offered sacrifices for the sins of the people, they first had to offer sacrifices for their own sin. They were as sinful as the people to whom they ministered. Their priestly duties were stained with their own sin. They demonstrated that they themselves had never been able to overcome the sin that separated them from God. They ministered on God's behalf but were themselves held in the bondage of sin and in need of a Saviour.

Listen to the words Hebrews 10:

1 For 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. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? 3 But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. (Hebrews 10)

There are several things we need to understand from these verses. The law with its priests and regulations was a shadow of things to come – “the law has but of shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities” (Hebrews 10:1).

It is important that we understand what the writer of Hebrews is telling us here. He is saying that the law, with its priests, sacrifices and regulations, was merely a shadow. A shadow is very different from the reality. The implication here is that the priesthood of the Old Testament was not the final reality. There was something greater. A shadow represents the presence of a reality but is nothing in comparison to the reality. In other words, the Law and the priesthood merely represented what was yet to come. There was something much greater than the Levitical priesthood that was going to be revealed in its right time. Like a shadow, the Levitical and Aaronic priesthood would pass.

Notice also from Hebrews 10:1-2 that the sacrifices the Old Testament priests offered every year could never make those who brought them perfect – “it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near” (Hebrews 10:1).

Every year special sacrifices were made for the sins of the people. In fact, every day of the year sacrifices were offered on behalf of the people because of their sin. Imagine that you were sick and the doctor prescribed a medication for you. You take that medication every day but the symptoms continue. You still have the same problem. What would you think of the medication? If the medication does not make you better, then you would likely go back to your doctor and tell him that it wasn't working for you.

Consider what is happening in the ministry of the Old Testament priests. Every year they offered sacrifices for the sins of the people but the people continued to sin. Countless animals were slaughtered for the sins of the people but the people did not stop sinning. The very fact that the sacrifices had to be offered year after year shows us that the problem of sin was not resolved. The writer of Hebrews would go as far as to say:

4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 10)

The priests of the Old Testament were facing an impossible task. Sin separated creation from its Creator. The only solution they had for this problem was to sacrifice animals on behalf of the humans who sinned. We read, however, in Hebrews 10:4 that it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. These priests could not offer a solution to a sinful world lost in sin.

There is another point the writer of Hebrews makes about the Old Testament priests in Hebrews 7.

23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office. (Hebrews 7)

There were many priests in the Old Testament. These priests ministered for a time and then they died. There were things in life over which they had no control. They did not have power over sin nor did they have power over death. Despite their greatest efforts, they could not defeat these two great enemies. What hope could they offer the people if these enemies could not be defeated? Would you place your confidence in a commander who was too weak to give you victory over your enemy?

Another issue with the priests of the Old Testament is reflected in Hebrews 9:

6 These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, 7 but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. 8 By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, 10 but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. (Hebrews 9)

Notice what this passage tells us. It reminds us that the temple of God was divided into three main parts. The courtyard was where the average Jews could come for worship. The Holy Place was reserved for priests only. Finally, the High Priest could only enter the Most Holy Place once a year. This high priest could only enter the Most Holy Place by first offering sacrifices for his own sin lest he die by entering in an unworthy manner. The way to God was not open to the average person. Even the ordinary priest could not enter the presence of God. The High priest alone could enter only after cleansing himself, but he could only do so once a year and for a very particular purpose.

The priesthood of the Old Testament could not deal with this matter of uniting God and His people. They, themselves could not enter the presence of God without fear of

death. The way to God was not opened through the priesthood of the Old Testament. The priests were powerless to bring their people into the presence of God. Despite all their sacrifices and offerings, the way to God remained closed.

Let me summarize what we have seen here in the book of Hebrews. We are told that the priests of the Old Testament were sinners, unable to overcome sin in their own lives. They offered sacrifices of bulls and goats that could never take away sin. They were unable to overcome the power of death. They could not enter the presence of God without fear of dying. They ministered in a system which was merely a shadow of a reality that was to come.

Hebrews 7:11 speaks of this:

11 Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than on names after the order of Aaron? (Hebrews 7)

The priesthood of Aaron would come to an end. It had served its purpose. It showed us the need for a more perfect priesthood—one that would give us victory over sin and death. One that would break down the wall of separation between God and His creation.

For Consideration:

- Could we ever have victory over sin by means of the sacrifices of bulls and goats? What do the endless sacrifices of the Old Testament priests show us?
- Were the Old Testament priests ever able to reconcile God and His creation? What evidence is there of a continued separation between them in the Old Testament?
- Was the Old Testament priesthood designed to be permanent? What did this Old Testament priesthood show us about our need?
- Take a moment to consider your need of a solution to the problem of sin and death. What is needed for victory over these great enemies?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the promise of a greater priesthood than that of Aaron.
- Thank the Lord that He has offered a solution to the problem of sin and death.
- Thank the Lord that because of His work on the cross the barrier of sin has been removed and we can approach boldly into the presence of God.

Chapter 17 - The Order of Melchizedek

We saw in the last chapter how the Old Testament points us to the need of a new priesthood. That priesthood would come in the person of Jesus Christ. Consider the words of the writer of Hebrews:

1 Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. (Hebrews 3)

This same thought is again repeated in Hebrews 4:

14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4)

The writer to the Hebrews goes into detail to explain why Jesus Christ is a better high priest than any of the descendants of Aaron (Hebrews 5-10). This is a subject for another study. What is important for us in the context of this study is to see how the priestly line moved from the Levitical priesthood to Jesus.

According to the Law of Moses, only the descendants of Levi were to perform the priestly duties. It is significant then, considering the declaration of the writer of Hebrews about Jesus as a high priest, that Jesus was not a descendant of Levi.

14 For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. (Hebrews 7)

This means that Jesus came to institute a new priesthood – one that was different from the priesthood of the Old Testament. Again, the writer of Hebrews speaks of this in Hebrews 7:

11 Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? 12 For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. (Hebrews 7)

Notice what the writer of Hebrews is telling us here. It was necessary for another priesthood to arise because the Levitical priesthood could not deal with the matter of sin. He also tells us that this new priesthood would be of another order. It would not be a Levitical priesthood but a priesthood of the order of Melchizedek. Finally, he tells us that when there is a change of priesthood there is of necessity also a change in the law. In other words, under this new priesthood, the old way of the Law of Moses would pass and give birth to something new. What is the order of Melchizedek and who was Melchizedek? Let's take a moment now to consider this.

There are only three books of the Bible that speak about Melchizedek. The first reference to him occurs in Genesis 14. Abram's nephew Lot had separated from him and settled in the region of Sodom where he grazed his flocks and raised his family. On one occasion, a coalition of kings invaded and captured the city where Lot and his family were living. These kings took Lot captive (Genesis 14:11-12).

The news of Lot's capture reached Abram. When he heard what had happened he gathered 318 men and pursued the enemy to rescue his nephew from them. The Lord give him wonderful success and he returned home with Lot, his family and his possessions (Genesis 14:13-16).

On his way home from this battle, Abram and his men met Melchizedek, the king of Salem. Melchizedek brought bread and wine to Abram and his men to eat. Obviously, they would have been exhausted after this battle. Not only did Melchizedek supply Abram with these much-needed supplies but he also blessed him:

19 And he blessed him and said,
"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemy into your hand!
(Genesis 14)

There are two important details we need to see here. First, according to Genesis 14:18 it appears that Melchizedek of his own free will, and as an act of generosity, is led by God to reach out to Abram in his time of need. Notice second, that Melchizedek has an awareness of the God of Israel and worships Him in the presence of Abram. The God of Abram was, according to Melchizedek, the God Most High, the possessor of heaven and earth. He recognized that it

was not Abram's strength that had given him victory but the Lord God Most High.

Genesis 14:18 goes on to say that Melchizedek was "priest of God Most High." We also learn from this verse that he was also king of Salem. Most commentators agree that Salem refers here to the city of Jerusalem. Melchizedek, therefore is a priestly king who reigned in Jerusalem as a worshipper of the true God – the God of Abram. We have no record as to how Melchizedek came to know the God of Abram, but what is clear is that the work of God was not limited to the descendants of Abram only. God was touching other people as well.

We can only imagine what the encounter between Abram and Melchizedek must have been like. As far as Abram knew, he and his family alone knew and worshipped the God who created the heavens and the earth. Here on his return from battle, the Lord shows him a fellow worshipper. This king reached out to Abram in his time of need and blessed him. Together they celebrated the victory of the Most High God. Notice that Abram was so touched by this encounter that he gave to Melchizedek one-tenth of everything he brought back from his battle (Genesis 14:20).

We learn from this that Melchizedek was a priest in service of the God of Abram in the city of Jerusalem. He was a priest, even before the institution of the Levitical priesthood under Moses. Though he was not a descendant of Abram or Jewish in nationality, Melchizedek was a true Gentile worshipper of the Lord God.

The next reference to Melchizedek comes in Psalm 110. Here David speaks prophetically of the Lord Jesus who was to come as the Messiah. David points out that though

he was king of Israel there was a Lord who was over him who gave him victory over his enemies:

1 The LORD says to my Lord:
Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool” (Psalm 110)

As David continues in this psalm he speaks about how the Lord gave him victory from Zion (Jerusalem). As he speaks about the victory of the Lord, David reminds his readers that the God who gave him victory was also a priest from the order of Melchizedek:

4 The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110)

The Lord who gave David victory, was a priest, not of the order of Aaron but of Melchizedek. Running parallel to the order of Aaron and the Law of Moses was a second priestly line. This priestly line of Melchizedek is older than the line of Aaron. It begins in the book of Genesis. David refers to it here in the book of Psalms but it only comes into full view in the New Testament book of Hebrews.

The writer of Hebrews makes it quite clear that Jesus was appointed to be priest in this order – the order of Melchizedek:

5 So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;
6 as he says also in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 5)

The connection between the Lord Jesus and the priesthood of Melchizedek is quite clear. Notice who appointed the Lord Jesus to this position. Hebrews 5:5 tells us that it was the one who said to Him: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”

This phrase “You are my Son; today I have begotten you,” comes from Psalm 2:6-7:

6 “As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”
7 I will tell of the decreed:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you. (Psalm 2)

The writer of Hebrews tells us that it was the Lord God who spoke this about His Son:

5 For to which of the angels did God ever say,
“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”?
Or again,
I will be to him a father,
and he shall be to me a son? (Hebrews 1)

We understand from this, therefore, that Jesus was appointed priest after the order of Melchizedek by God Himself. There are several details in the book of Hebrews we need to examine about this Melchizedekian priesthood.

The Melchizedekian Priesthood is Greater than the Levitical Priesthood

Hebrews 7:4-10 tells us that the order of Melchizedek was greater than the order of Levi.

9 One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes paid tithes through Abram, 10 for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him. (Hebrews 7)

In this passage, the writer of Hebrews refers to the incident where Abram gave a tenth of all he had to Melchizedek. By giving a tithe Abram submits to Melchizedek. Levi, a descendant of Abram not yet born, symbolically bows to Melchizedek and offers him a tithe through his forefather. Even Levi whose descendants would be priests recognized the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood.

The Melchizedekian Priesthood is Forever

The priests of the Levitical order would die and be replaced by other priests. The priesthood of Melchizedek, however, was a priesthood that would last forever.

23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7)

Unlike the Levitical priesthood, the order of Melchizedek would never come to an end. The Lord Jesus will live forever and be our priest through all eternity.

The Melchizedekian Priesthood Would Bring a Change of Law

Hebrews 7:12 reminds us that when there is a change of priesthood there must also be a change of law. The very fact that someone who was not from the tribe of Levi was functioning as priest, indicates the necessity of a change of law. According to the Old Testament law of Moses such a person deserved to die because of his blasphemy. Under this new priesthood this law no longer applied. The Lord Jesus is not a descendant of Levi, but He functions as priest. This Law of Moses has been put aside:

18 For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness. 19 (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced through which we draw near to God. (Hebrews 7)

The Melchizedekian Priesthood Offers Us Hope

Under the priesthood of Levi, continuous sacrifices were offered, and yet the problem of sin was never resolved. The priesthood of Melchizedek offers us hope we could never have had under the priesthood of Levi with all its sacrifices.

15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. (Hebrews 9)

The Lord Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant as priest of Melchizedek. This covenant is not the same as the old one. From this verse, we understand that the new covenant accomplishes what the Old covenant could not accomplish under the Levitical priests.

Notice the phrase: “a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant” (Hebrews 9:15b) The blood of bulls and goats could not save the Old Testament souls under the priesthood of Levi. Only by the death of Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, could the sins of the Old Testament saints be fully covered. As a priest of the order of Melchizedek, Jesus offers complete forgiveness.

Notice also that as the mediator of a new priesthood and covenant “those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15a). There is a guarantee of inheritance in the presence of the Father through the forgiveness that the Lord Jesus offers as priest of the order of Melchizedek.

We see from this that the Lord Jesus would become our High Priest. He did not come as a Levitical priest but as a priest from a different order. As a priest of a different order He came to mediate a new covenant. With this new priesthood and covenant we have a guarantee of eternal life. What the Levitical priesthood could not accomplish, the Melchizedekian priesthood would.

For Consideration:

- Why is it significant that the Lord Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi?

- Why was there a need for a new priesthood?
- Who was Melchizedek? What kind of relationship did he have with the God of Abram?
- What does the fact that the priesthood of Melchizedek was older than that of Levi show us about the purpose of God? What does it show us about the plan of God for the Gentile world?
- How is the Melchizedekian priesthood greater than the Levitical priesthood?
- Are we under the Law of Moses as administered by the Levitical priesthood today?
- What encouragement do you find in the fact that the Lord Jesus came to establish a new priesthood and new covenant relationship with you?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord that He came to offer us hope as a new priest of a new covenant.
- Thank the Lord for the fact that even before the Levitical priesthood, there were Gentiles like Melchizedek who loved and served Him.
- Do you know of individuals who still look to the Old Testament law to bring them salvation? Ask the Lord to point these individuals to Jesus Christ a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Chapter 18 - Jesus the High Priest

We have discussed the order of Melchizedek which replaced the Levitical priesthood with the coming of Jesus. Hebrews 6:19-20 make it clear that Jesus is a high priest of this order of Melchizedek:

19 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 6)

We have in Jesus the High Priest, “a sure and steadfast anchor for our soul” (Hebrews 6:19). Let us consider what Hebrews has to say about Jesus, the High Priest.

The Holiness and Power of Jesus the High Priest

The book of Hebrews begins with a very important statement about the Lord Jesus. Listen to the author’s description of the Lord Jesus in Hebrews 1:3:

3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the uni-

verse by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Hebrews 1)

Jesus is described as the “radiance of the glory of God.” The passage does not say that he reflects the glory and radiance of God, but rather that He “is the radiance of the glory of God.” There is a big difference between reflecting the glory of God and being the glory of God. Jesus is the glory of the Father.

Jesus is also “the exact imprint” of the nature of the Father. In every way, He demonstrates to us who the Father is. He is in every point like the Father, perfect in all His ways.

Finally, notice that Jesus the high priest “upholds the universe by the word of His power.” The whole universe is under His control. His power is such that all He needs to do is speak and His will is done.

What Levitical priest could make such a claim? Jesus, as High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, is the radiance of God. His is the exact imprint of God. He sustains the universe by His mighty power. Nothing is out of His control. Everything is dependent on Him. This is unimaginable power. Our destiny is in His hands.

The Victory of Jesus the High Priest over Satan and Death

The greatest enemies we face on this earth are Satan, sin and death. The Levitical priests were unable to conquer these great enemies. We have seen that they repeatedly fell into sin. They had no control over how long they could serve as priests before death would take them. This is not the case with Jesus the High Priest.

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Hebrews 2)

Jesus became human, although He was God. As a human being, He died and rose victorious over sin and death. Through His death and resurrection, He destroyed the power of death and the devil, delivering us from their grip. Death can no longer hold those who trust in Him. Satan has no ultimate authority over those who have trusted in Jesus' atoning sacrifice. As our high priest, Jesus, accomplished what no Levitical priest could. He gives us victory over the claim of Satan on our lives and victory over death.

Merit, Not Family Line

The Levitical priests obtained their position by means of their family line. Family line did not guarantee a good priest. This was evident in the history of the priesthood. There were many descendants of Aaron who rebelled against God and dishonoured Him in their service as priest. Jesus did not become a priest through his ancestry but by His merit.

15 This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, 16 who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. (Hebrews 7)

Jesus became High Priest because of His qualifications. He had the power of an indestructible life. It is true that when Jesus died, He laid down His life, but death could

not hold Him. He overcame death and rose to be with His Father. Death could not hold Him because it had no claim on Him. Death is a result of sin. It was because of sin that death entered the world in the Garden of Eden. Romans 6:23 tells us that the “wages of sin is death.” Since He was the perfect Son of God, death had no legal right to keep Him. Jesus rose from the dead and now lives forever.

Jesus obtained His priesthood on the basis of His merit. He is the perfect High Priest. Sin and death have no claim on Him. He lives an indestructible life. The Levitical priests were all subject to human weakness and frailty. Only Jesus, the High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, can offer us hope, for He alone has achieved this role by His perfect life.

26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. 28 For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. (Hebrews 7)

No Longer a Shadow of Heavenly Things

The Levitical priests served in an earthly tent or temple sacrificing animals to the Lord. These sacrifices were symbols of the reality to come. Jesus, the High Priest, no longer serves in symbols and shadows but in reality:

1 Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,
2 a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. (Hebrews 8)

Jesus, our high priest is seated at the place of highest honour in heaven. He is seated before the Father pleading for us and ministering on our behalf. He does not minister in an earthly tent that represents the reality of heaven, but in the very presence of God Himself.

The Levitical priests could not stand in the presence of God. Only the high priest could enter once a year into the Most Holy Place, and that could only take place after cleansing Himself. Jesus, our high priest, dwells in the Most Holy Place. He sits at the right hand of the Father ministering on our behalf.

A Purified Conscience

While many sacrifices were offered by the Levitical priests, these sacrifices never fully removed the guilt of the person for whom the sacrifice was made. Listen to the words of Hebrews 9: 8-9:

8 By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper. (Hebrews 9)

The sacrifices offered were not able to cleanse the consciences of the people who brought them. Hebrews 9:13

tells us that: “the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh.” The problem was, however, that they could not “perfect the conscience.” What does it mean to have a perfect conscience? If you have a clean conscience you are innocent of any wrongdoing. To perfect the conscience is to remove any trace of guilt. While the sacrifices of the animals on the altar purified the flesh, they did not remove the guilt of the conscience. The people for whom the sacrifices were offered were ceremonially and physically clean but they still carried the guilt of sin in their heart – they were clean on the outside but still needed to be cleansed in their heart and conscience.

Listen to the words of Hebrews 9:14 about Jesus our High Priest:

14 How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9)

The sacrifice of Christ does what no bull or goat could ever do. It purifies our conscience and removes the very root of guilt. We can stand before Him now completely innocent, not because we are perfect but because His sacrifice covers every one of our sins and removes our guilt. Our conscience is pure before Him –no sin is held to our account. Jesus completely removes our guilt and gives us access to the Father. This is something the Levitical priest could not do.

Once for All

For hundreds of years, the Levitical priests continued to offer sacrifices. They needed to purify themselves and the

people to whom they ministered. After millions of sacrifices, the guilt of God's people remained. Hebrews 10:11-14 tells us, however, that the one sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, our high priest accomplished what no other sacrifice could:

11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10)

Christ offered a single sacrifice for sins. When He completed that sacrifice, He sat down at the right hand of God and waited for that one-time sacrifice to accomplish its purpose. That single sacrifice, perfected, forever, those for whom He died. The effects of that one sacrifice of Jesus our High Priest are still being felt in our day. His sacrifice is still cleansing the conscience of those who are guilty before God the Father. It is still transforming and cleansing the hearts of men, women and young children across the entire world. The church of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God continues to expand, breaking down the strongholds of Satan and sin.

Notice that this one sacrifice of Jesus has taken care of the guilt of sin forever. There will never need to be another sacrifice for sin. The sacrifice of Jesus covers all my sin – past, present and future. It guarantees me a pure conscience and freedom from guilt for all time.

The Levitical priest, with all his sacrifices, could not even cleanse his own conscience. Millions of sacrifices were offered but none of these sacrifices could remove the guilt of sin from the heart of the worshiper. Jesus, our great High Priest, offered a one-time sacrifice that was so powerfully effective that it continues to cleanse the conscience of any who will come to Him. He is the perfect High Priest.

For Consideration:

- How does the Lord Jesus as High Priest reflect the glory of God and His power? How does He compare to the Levitical priests?
- What does Hebrews 2:14-15 tell us about the victory of Jesus our high priest over Satan and death?
- What is the difference between meriting and inheriting a title? Why is it important that Christ merited His title as High Priest?
- What did the sacrifices of the Old Testament accomplish?
- What do we learn about the power of the one-time sacrifice of Christ? Have you personally experienced the power of that sacrifice?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is the perfect high priest who is the glory of the Father.

- Thank the Lord for the power of His one-time sacrifice. Thank Him for the way His sacrifice has changed your life.
- Ask the Lord to open the hearts of your family and friends to the powerful work of Jesus the High Priest.

Chapter 19 - Jesus' Qualification as High Priest

John 17 is known as the High Priestly prayer of Jesus. This is because it is a prayer He offered to the Father just before he was to make the greatest sacrifice ever made – His life for the sins of the world. This prayer has much to teach us about the qualifications of Jesus as High priest and His ministry on our behalf. In this chapter, I want to examine what John 17 teaches us about the qualifications of Jesus as our great High Priest.

Jesus has authority to give eternal life (verse 2)

As Jesus prays to the Father in John 17, He reveals many important details about Himself and His calling. Asking the father to glorify Him now that He was ready to offer His life as a sacrifice, Jesus prayed:

1... Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. (John 17)

Notice what the Lord Jesus says here. The Father gave Him authority to give eternal life. This is something that no Levitical priest could do. Jesus alone has been given the authority to grant eternal life to those the Father has given

to Him. His sacrifice alone is sufficient to cover the penalty of sin and to set us free from judgement.

Jesus was sent by the Father (verse 3)

Jesus goes on in John 17:3 to say:

3 And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17)

There were those who questioned the authority of Jesus during His ministry (see Mark 11:28; Luke 20:2). Jesus makes it quite clear that the source of His authority was God Himself. There can be no higher authority than this. The Father called Jesus and sent Him to minister on His behalf as High Priest.

Jesus perfectly accomplished the work of the Father (verse 4)

Jesus was sent by the Father with the authority to give eternal life. Notice also in John 17:4 that He was faithful in fulfilling that ministry:

4 I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. (John 17)

The Lord Jesus did all that the Father had given Him to do. He accomplished perfectly that work of God for the salvation of sinful souls. He overcame tremendous obstacles but the result was the completion of the work given to Him for the salvation of all who belonged to the Father. When Jesus cried out from the cross: "it is finished" (John 19:30) He was telling the world that everything had been done for

the salvation of the sinful human race. Full pardon was now available for all who would come to Him.

Jesus perfectly manifested the name of the Father (verse 6)

As He walked on this earth during His ministry, Jesus was confident that He had shown the character of God to all the Father had given Him.

6 I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. (John 17)

The task the Father had given the Son was to reveal Him and His heart to the world. Jesus did this. He shared the heart of the Father and revealed His purpose to those the Father had given Him. We would not know God were it not for the ministry of His Son in revealing Him to us by His life, His actions and His words. This revelation of the Father was so complete that on one occasion He told His disciples: "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also." (John 14:7). To know the Son was to know the Father because the Son perfectly reflected the character of the Father in all He did and said.

Jesus Faithfully Proclaimed the Words of the Father (verse 8)

Jesus also was faithful in what He said. In John 17:8 Jesus prayed:

8 For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come

to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (John 17)

There are many preachers and teachers in our day who do not represent the Word of God accurately. This was not the case for Jesus. He had confidence that everything He said was from the Father. In fact, He told His disciples in John 14:

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his work (John 14)

Jesus made it clear that He only said what the Father gave Him to say. We can have absolute confidence in Jesus' words. He perfectly revealed the heart and purpose of the Father in what He taught.

Jesus Prays for His people (verse 9)

In John 17:9 we see Jesus praying for His people. He was faithful in the words He spoke and he was also a man of prayer. His confidence was in the Father and He called down the blessings of the Father on His people. This is a ministry He continues to exercise on our behalf:

25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7)

Jesus continues to plead our case before the Father. He faithfully prays for us and procures for us the Father's protection, blessing and guidance.

Jesus Guards those who belong to the Father (verse 12)

As our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus guards and keeps us. This is an obligation He takes on Himself.

12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, what the Scripture might be fulfilled. (John 17)

Jesus acts as a Shepherd for His sheep. When one of them begins to wander, He goes after them. He is aware of every struggle they feel and will minister to those struggles. It is not His will that any be lost. He will keep them and protect them from the many spiritual enemies that seek to destroy them. All who belong to the Father are kept by Jesus for the Father. He will complete the work He began in the lives of His people. He will keep us until we are presented to the Father in Heaven. Our salvation is in His hands. We may wander but He is faithful to pursue us. He guards all who belong to the Father.

Jesus consecrates Himself for His people (verse 19)

The faithfulness of Jesus to us is seen in John 17:19 where He told His Father:

19 And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth (John 17)

Notice what the Lord Jesus says here: "for their sake I consecrate myself." To consecrate oneself to something is to devote oneself or to set oneself apart for a purpose. This is what Jesus is saying here. He has devoted Himself to

those who belong to the Father. His great desire is that they be sanctified or made perfect in the will of God. Jesus is devoted, as High Priest to your care. He has given Himself to perfect the work He began in your life and will see it to completion.

Jesus fills His people with the glory of the Father (verse 22)

Jesus tells His Father in John 17:22 that He has given to His people the glory the Father gave Him.

22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, that they may be one even as we are one (John 17)

Sin was a shameful chain around our neck. The Lord Jesus came and removed that shame. He forgave us and made us children of God through His work on the cross. The shame is now gone. We are children of God. We are ambassadors of God and His lights in this world. Through the forgiveness of Jesus, the Spirit of God has now come to dwell in our heart. The presence of God is in those who have received this forgiveness. They are empowered and indwelt by the Holy Spirit who leads and guides. What glory this is! What honour He bestows on those who have come to Him. He has taken us out shame into glory.

Jesus makes know the Love of God to His people (verse 26)

Not only does Jesus our High Priest fill us with glory and honour as children of God but John 17:26 also tells us that he also reveals to us the wonderful love of the Father.

26 I made known to them your name, and will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17)

Jesus wants each of His children to understand what it was that caused God to sacrifice His Son on their behalf. Notice the phrase: "that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." There is a connection between the love of God and the presence of Jesus. In fact, that love of God is made known through Jesus. Jesus demonstrates this love in the lives of those who belong to the Father by living in them and caring for them as High Priest. He is always with us, keeping us, protecting us, guiding us and maturing us. His presence is the demonstration of the love of God for us. Never was such love more clearly demonstrated than in the work of Jesus as our High Priest.

There has never been a High Priest like Jesus. He is the perfect High Priest who ministers perfectly to every need. He has consecrated Himself to the care of all the Father has given Him and is a perfect reflection of the Father and His heart to us. By His work alone are we able to enter the presence of the Father. In Him alone can we find true security.

For Consideration:

- By whose authority does Jesus minister as High Priest?
- How does Jesus reflect the character of God? How does He reveal to us the heart of God?

- What ministry does the Lord Jesus have as High Priest to you personally?
- Jesus tells His Father that He consecrates Himself to us and our spiritual walk and maturity. What encouragement does this bring you today? How does this reality give you confidence?
- How does Jesus demonstrate the love of God for you personally? Give some specific examples.

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord God that He sent the perfect High Priest to us in the person of His Son.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord Jesus for His wonderful ministry as High Priest.
- Thank the Lord for specific times when He has reached out to You as High Priest to draw you back to the Father.
- Open your heart to the work of the Lord Jesus on your behalf. Ask Him to forgive you for times when you have resisted His work in your life.

Chapter 20 - The Desire of Our High Priest for Us

As we conclude this study on the priestly line from Genesis to Jesus, I want to take a moment to consider the desire of our Great High Priest for us as recorded in His prayer in John 17. In this prayer Jesus reflects His pastoral heart for all who have come to Him.

That we would be kept in God's name (verse 11)

In John 17:11 Jesus knew that His time to leave this world was coming to an end. As He reflects on this, He prays to the Father saying:

11 And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you, Holy Father keep them in your name... (John 17)

What does it mean to be kept in the name of God? First, the name of God is an all-powerful name. At the sound of His name even the demons of hell flee. Jesus knew that He would be no longer physically present on the earth and so He has committed us into the hands of the Father. In His name, we will be safe.

Beyond this, however, the name of God represents His character. As Jesus prays for His disciples, He is praying

that they would be kept faithful to God and His purpose for their lives. It is the desire of the Lord Jesus that we be faithful ambassadors of the Father and represent His name well on this earth, just as He had done. Admittedly, this will mean facing persecution and suffering. For those times, Jesus prays that the Father would keep us and protect us by His powerful and authoritative name.

That we would be one (verse 11)

Notice also in verse 11 that the Lord Jesus goes on to pray: “that they may be one, even as we are one.” The oneness of believers is demonstrated in several ways. This oneness comes from the fact that we have been adopted into the family of God and belong to Him as children. As children of God we have a common purpose—that is to love and honour our heavenly Father. We love and honour Him by walking faithfully in His purpose for our lives. We honour Him by believing His Word and committing ourselves to obedience. We love Him by turning from other loves to devote ourselves to Him alone.

If the love of God is in us, then we will respect and honour not only our heavenly Father but also our brothers and sisters. Listen to the words of Jesus in John 13:

35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13)

There is a strong connection between our love for God and our love for His children. The prophet Zechariah would capture this when he spoke to the nation that had plundered the people of God:

8 For thus said the LORD of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he

who touches you touches the apple of his eye.”
(Zechariah 2)

If we understand the love of God for each of His children we will be careful in how we treat them. To dishonour one of God's children is to dishonour the Lord who loves them. It will also affect the efforts of the body to serve and glorify the Lord God. When one part of the body is hurt, the whole body suffers as a result. By our divisiveness we hinder the work of Christ on this earth and the ability of the whole body to bring glory to the Father as He deserves. It is the desire of the Lord Jesus that we be one – one in truth and in purpose. His desire is to see the body of Christ lift up the name of the Father and honour Him as one. This will mean dealing with anything that would keep us from working in harmony with each other for the glory of His name.

That we would have His joy in us (verse 13)

It is true that living for the Lord God will not always be easy in this life. There will be times of rejection and persecution. It is the desire of the Lord Jesus, however, that despite these struggles, we would have His joy fulfilled in us:

13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. (John 17)

What is the object of this joy? John 17:13 tells us that it is in the words Jesus spoke to His people when He was in the world. What was the message of Jesus? It was a message of hope and forgiveness. It was a message of victory over sin and death. It was a message of eternal life through His death. It was a message of eternal joy in the presence of the Father forever. Consider the many promises of Jesus. These words fill us with hope and confidence to face

whatever the enemy throws at us. It is the desire of the Lord Jesus that we experience the fullness of joy in our life in believing what He has promised.

That we would be kept from the evil one (verse 15)

Notice also in verse 15 that it is the desire of the Lord Jesus that we be delivered from the evil one:

15 I do not ask that you would take them out of the world, but that you would keep them from the evil one. (John 17)

Satan has set believers as his target. His great desire is to cause them to fall. We are here on this earth for a purpose. Jesus does not pray that we would be taken from this world but that we would be kept from the power of Satan and the forces of evil. His desire is that we will not be overcome by sin and Satan. There are many believers who seem to live in defeat. This is not the will of Jesus for them. He wants each of His children to be victorious over the attacks of the enemy. He wants to see them living in the wonderful victory of the Lord in their lives and hearts. We will not be free from the battle until we are in the presence of the Lord Jesus in heaven, but as long as we are living on this earth it is His desire that we live as conquerors. In His strength, we can do this.

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8)

That we would be sanctified in the truth (verse 17)

In John 17:17 Jesus prays:

17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

To be sanctified is to be set apart for God. This implies the putting off the things of this world and becoming more and more like the Lord Jesus. Notice that it is the will of Jesus that we be set apart by means of the truth of God's Word. It is the Word of God that is our guide into faith and godly practice. There are many ideas and philosophies in this world that seek our attention. The Lord Jesus, however, prays that we would be guided by the truth of His word.

As believers, we have not only accepted the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross for our salvation but also His word as our standard of belief and practice. We are not like the world. We are not governed by worldly thinking. Our standard is found in the teaching of Scripture. This is our guide. We have chosen to walk in obedience to this standard and willingly suffer the insults of others as we do. We have chosen God's way above the ways of the world. We are distinguished as a people who follow the Word of God. We keep ourselves in the Word and seek more and more to be faithful to every principle taught in it. It is the desire of the Lord Jesus that we be a people of the Word.

That we would be in God (verse 21)

The desire of the Lord Jesus our high priest is also seen in what He says in John 17:21:

21 ... that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17)

It is the cry of the Lord Jesus that the believer be "in" Him and His Father. What does it mean to be in God? To be in God is to share His heart and purpose. More than this, however, it is also to share in His authority, strength and

wisdom. Jesus does not want us to be defenceless. His heart is for us to walk in the power of God. He gives us authority in His name to overcome the forces that stand between us and the purpose of God for our lives. He equips us with the armour of God, the gifts of God and the fruit of the Spirit. In Him we are strong. In His wisdom, we move past the deception of the enemy. This reflects the heart of Jesus our high priest for victory in this world.

That we would demonstrate God's love (verse 23)

All these blessings from God are for a purpose. Listen to what the Lord Jesus says in John 17:23:

23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.
(John 17)

The Lord God reveals His presence in us so that the world may know that He sent His son and loves us. Consider this for a moment. Have you ever seen the life of someone who the world had given up on be transformed by the power of God? Have you ever seen God reach out miraculously and restore health through the prayers of His people? What does this show us? It shows us that the power of God is present in the lives of His people. It shows us that God has come down to humankind. It shows us the power of the name of Jesus which is alive in us. Ultimately it shows us that God, in His wonderful grace has chosen to take up residence in our lives. This is a reflection of His great love for us and His willingness to work in us and through us.

What happens when the love of Christ touches us? Does it not transform us? We forgive those who have hurt us.

We bless those who curse us. We are set free from bitterness and jealousy. We minister in His name. What does this show the world? Does it not show them that the love of God is in us?

It is the desire of our great High Priest that we demonstrate the wonderful and powerful presence of God in this world. In doing so we demonstrate the favour of God on our lives and His presence in us. The light of God's love shines through us to a world trapped in sin, pointing them to the victory possible through His Son.

That we would be with Him forever (verses 24)

Listen to the request of the Lord Jesus in John 17:24:

24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17)

Consider this request for a moment. The Lord Jesus, our great High Priest has taken a very personal interest in us. We have seen how He wants us to be safe in this world. He wants us to know the fullness of joy and the power of God to live in complete victory over the attacks of the evil one. His desire is that we be with Him forever. There in His presence we will be safe and secure. No sin will ever separate us from fellowship with Him. No sickness or disease will harm us. We will enjoy perfect and unhindered joy and fellowship with Christ and experience the purpose for which we were created. There is deep love and tenderness in this request of Jesus. His great passion is for us. We are the focus of His work. We are His joy.

That He would be in us (verse 26)

Notice the final words of Jesus in John 17:

26 I have made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17)

Not only is it the desire of the Lord Jesus that we would be with Him forever but it is His desire to be in us Himself. There could be no closer communion or intimacy – Jesus in us. By His Spirit He takes up residence in our lives to guide us every step of our way. His Spirit will comfort us when we are struggling, and strengthen us to face the trials that come our way.

The Lord Jesus offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sin, but His work did not stop there. He continues to minister on our behalf, not from a distance but from within our hearts. His indwelling is a guarantee of our victory. This is something the Levitical priests of the Old Testament could never do. We can have a very intimate connection with Jesus our High Priest. He knows us and all our struggles – nothing is hidden from Him. His work is a very powerful work, reaching to the very thoughts and attitudes of our heart. He cleanses us, not just on the outside but from within.

In Jesus, we have the perfect High Priest. His sacrifice has paid the legal penalty for all our sin. His indwelling cleanses us and gives us victory over the obstacles that keep us from the Father. His strength enables us. His wisdom guides us. His Spirit comforts us. His presence convicts us and fills us with fullness of joy. He is not only our

High Priest – He is also our God. To this perfect High Priest may our knees bow.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to be kept in the name of God? To what extent has your life demonstrated that you are a child of God?
- How important is our relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ? What impact will a positive relationship with our brothers and sister have for the sake of Christ in this world?
- To what extent are you experiencing the joy of the Lord? Is joy an important aspect of the Christian life? Why do you suppose it is the great desire of the Lord that we experience joy? What kind of testimony is a joyless faith?
- What role does the Word of God have in your Christian life? Have you ever had to make a choice between the Word of God and the ways of the world?
- What evidence is there in your life of the power and presence of Jesus in you? How has the presence of the Spirit of God transformed your life?
- Compare the ministry of the Levitical priests to the priesthood of the Lord Jesus. What differences do you find?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord Jesus for His role as the perfect High Priest. Thank Him that He has met all your needs.
- Ask the Lord to heal any personal relationship issues you have with a brother or sister in Christ so that together you can bring glory to God.
- Ask the Lord to fill you with a deeper joy in what He has done for you and is doing in you still.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord that He wants you to be with Him forever and that He fills you even now with His presence to guide and strengthen. Thank Him that He takes such a personal interest in you.
- Ask the Lord God to give you grace to submit more and more to the ongoing work of the Lord Jesus in your life.
- If you have never opened your heart to the Lord Jesus, take a moment now to consider His desire for you. Cry out to Him and accept His work on your behalf. Ask Him to forgive you and to cleanse and keep you.

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