

What Child Is This?

Jesus the Priest

Intro

This week we will look at the special role Jesus plays as our high priest. In order to understand what this means we will examine how priests functioned in the Old Testament and some of the duties they performed. From there, we will learn how the book of Hebrews describes Jesus as the great, superior high priest who opened the way for us to God.

Priests in the Bible

During the OT period the priesthood came through the tribe of Levi in Israel. The tribe was divided into two groups, each with distinctive areas of responsibility. (1) The priests, who were the descendants of Aaron, held the principal responsibility for the conduct of worship, initially in the tabernacle and later in the temple. (2) The remainder of the Levites were support staff, being responsible for the maintenance of the temple establishment and certain supplementary religious duties.

The priesthood was established by Aaron and his sons in the time of Moses, when Israel's religion was formally instituted in the covenant of Mount Sinai. Aaron, the first high priest, had principal responsibility for the conduct of Israel's worship, for the tabernacle, and for all the sacrifices and festivals that had to do with the religious life of the people. Certain responsibilities were designated to his sons, who functioned as priests. The office of high priest and the priesthood in general were transmitted throughout OT times on a hereditary basis.

In the NT there are frequent references to priests and Levites; they are referred to as servants of the Jerusalem temple and members of the religious establishment. In most matters their functions were the same as in OT times, but the nature of the high priesthood had changed. Though the office had originally been hereditary and held by the descendants of Aaron, by the mid-second century B.C. the office had become in effect the priest who was, among other responsibilities, president of the Sanhedrin and a small group of chief priests.



**Digging
Deeper**

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Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are —yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

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With the eventual destruction of Jerusalem's temple in A.D. 70, the tradition of priests and Levites came to an end in the Jewish religion. Their principal reason for existence had been the religion of the temple. Without the temple their purpose was gone, and their role as religious leaders within the Jewish community passed into the hands of the rabbis, just as the temple was replaced by the centrality of the synagogue (P. C. Craigie, "Priests and Levites" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker, 954).

Day of Atonement

The tenth day of the seventh month was set aside as a day of public fasting and humiliation. On this day the nation of Israel sought atonement for its sins (see Leviticus 16). The Day of Atonement was a recognition of the people's inability to make any atonement for their sins. It was a solemn, holy day accompanied by elaborate ritual.

The high priest who officiated on this day first sanctified himself by taking a ceremonial bath and putting on white garments. Then he had to make atonement for himself and other priests by sacrificing a young bull. God was enthroned on the mercy seat in the holy of holies, but no person could approach it except the high priest, who offered the blood of sacrifice.

After sacrificing a bull, the high priest chose a goat for a sin-offering and sacrificed it. Then he sprinkled its blood on and about the mercy seat. Finally, another goat, the scapegoat, bearing the sins of the people was sent into the wilderness. This scapegoat symbolized the pardon for sin brought through the sacrifice. The Day of Atonement ultimately pointed to the perfect sacrifice that Jesus would make to atone for the sins of the world ("Feasts and Festivals" in *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Nelson, 446).

Jesus Our High Priest

The book of the Bible that deals most thoroughly with the priestly role of Jesus is Hebrews. In Hebrews, we are told that Jesus is our "high priest" (Heb. 3:1; 4:14). In humility, although God, Jesus became a human being so as to identify with us. As fully God and fully man, Jesus alone is able to be the mediator between us and God (1 Tim. 2:5).

As our priest, Jesus has also offered a sacrifice to pay the penalty for our sin. Not only is Jesus a priest who is superior to the Old Testament priests, his sacrifice is also superior to theirs- he gave his own life and shed his own blood for our sin (Heb. 9:26).

Hebrews reveals that Jesus' ministry as our priest did not end with his return to heaven. Rather, Jesus is alive today and ministers to us as our high priest who intercedes for us before God the Father (Heb. 7:25). Practically, this means that Jesus actually knows us, loves us, pays attention to our lives, and cares for us. He does this not because we are great, but rather because he is our great high priest. It is Jesus our priest who knows every hair on our head, day of our life, longing of our heart, and thought in our mind. At this very moment, Jesus is bringing our hurts, suffering, needs, and sins to the Father in a prayerful and loving way as our priest (Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Jesus*, Crossway, 76).

From 7:1 to 10:18, the author of Hebrews teaches us what it means that Jesus is our high priest. The right of Jesus to be high priest, although he belonged to the tribe of Judah and not to the priestly tribe of Levi, is justified by comparison with the intriguing figure of Melchizedek, who functioned as an independent priest of God in the time of Abraham, long before the levitical priesthood came into being. Jesus also functions as an independent priest of God, appointed by God's oath. Because of the resurrection, Jesus is able to continue in office, uninterrupted by death, in contrast with the earthly levitical priests. He has made a once-for-all sacrifice, and he is able to exercise an uninterrupted ministry of intercession.

The author of Hebrews shows the superiority of Jesus' priesthood with two contrasts. The first is between the earthly character of the levitical priesthood, serving in the tabernacle built by Moses, and the heavenly character of the priesthood of Jesus, serving in the heavenly tabernacle of which the earthly was merely a copy. The second contrast is between the first or old covenant made with Moses and the promise of a new covenant made to Jeremiah. It is an easy step for the writer to assert that the second covenant must be superior to the first, since otherwise God would not have made it, and to identify it with the new state of affairs brought about by Jesus.

The author then compares the two systems. Both systems have the same general structure of a tabernacle with an altar and a system of offerings of sacrifices whose blood cleanses from sin. The two systems differ in that the heavenly tabernacle is not earthly, that Christ has offered himself and not an animal, that Christ has made one offering of himself once for all by contrast with the repeated sacrifices of the levitical priests, and that there is no need for repetition of the one offering. When Christ returns, it will not be to act again as a sacrificial victim but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

But the contrasts are even greater than that. The contrast is not between two equal ways of dealing with sin, the first being the one that worked in the past until it was superseded by the second, namely, the sacrifice of Christ. In fact, the levitical sacrifices could not of themselves take away sin: how could the blood of animals do that? Even though the law required them, they were not what God ultimately wanted. These sacrifices, therefore, were simply shadows or reflections of the real thing. The sacrifice of Christ achieves its end perfectly and once and for all, and thus it inaugurates a new covenant under which people can be truly cleansed from sin (I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, IVP, 609-610).

Jesus Our Mediator

The Old Testament priests not only offered sacrifices, but also in a representative way they came into the presence of God from time to time on behalf of the people. But Jesus does much more than that. As our perfect high priest, he continually *leads us* into God's presence so that we no longer have need of a Jerusalem temple, or of a special priesthood to stand between us and God. And Jesus does not come into the inner part (the holy of holies) of the earthly temple in Jerusalem, but he has gone into the heavenly equivalent of the holy of holies, the very presence of God himself in heaven (Heb. 9:24). Therefore we have a hope that follows him there: "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever" (Heb. 6:19-20).

This means that we have a far greater privilege than those people who lived at the time of the Old Testament temple. They could not even enter into the first room of the temple, the holy place, for only the priests could go there. Then into the inner room of the temple, the holy of holies, only the high priest could go, and he could only enter there once a year (Heb. 9:1-7). But when Jesus offered a perfect sacrifice for sins, the curtain or veil of the temple that closed off the holy of holies was torn in two from top to bottom (Luke 23:45), thus indicating in a symbolic way on earth that the way of access to God in heaven was opened by Jesus' death. Therefore the author of Hebrews can make this amazing exhortation to all believers:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith (Heb. 10:19-22).

Jesus has opened for us the way of access to God so that we can continually “draw near” into God's very presence without fear but with “confidence” and in “full of assurance of faith” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 626-627).

Final Thoughts

Old Testament priests were appointed to carry out the religious duties for ancient Israel. These duties centered around the sacrifices at the tabernacle and eventually the temple. However, these sacrifices never truly dealt with the people's sins. Ultimately, both the priests and the sacrifices pointed to Jesus. As the sinless one, Jesus is our perfect priest able to enter into God's presence. He also is our perfect sacrifice that can pay for the sins of the world. In Jesus, we have a high priest who continually sits before God the Father bringing our needs to him.

Home Group Questions

1. What were some of the problems with the Old Testament sacrificial system (see Heb. 10:1-4)?
2. How is Jesus the perfect sacrifice for our sins?
3. Read 1 Timothy 2:5-6. What does it mean that Jesus is the “one mediator”? What does this teach us about how we can come to God?
4. Consider the fact that right now Jesus is interceding for us before God the Father. What does this tell you about Jesus? What does this tell us about God's love for us?
5. Read Hebrews 4:15-16. How does the fact that Jesus is God and man enable him to better serve us as our high priest?
6. How can understanding Hebrews 4:15-16 help our prayer lives?

Personal Application

7. Are you boldly coming to God with your hurts, struggles, and burdens like the Bible tells us? If not, what is preventing you? How do you think the author of Hebrews would respond to your reasons?