

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

THE PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS CHRIST

The Bible teaches that there is a great gulf between the God of heaven, the Almighty Creator, and fallen mankind, the result of man's rebellion and sin. God declares: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9*). God is "of purer eyes than to behold evil", while fallen man "at his best state is altogether vanity" (Hab. 1:13; Ps. 39:5, AV). Thus men have long recognised the need for a go-between, a mediator who could intercede with God on their behalf. Job lamented: "Oh, that one might plead for a man with God, as a man pleads for his neighbour!" (Job 16:21). And God answered that need in the appointment of priests.

The office of priest

There are hints in Genesis of family priests in the age of the Patriarchs; and, when God established Israel as His chosen people, He instructed Moses to appoint as priests for the nation the house of Aaron, from the tribe of Levi: "Now take Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest" (Ex. 28:1). They were to wear special garments for the service of the tabernacle, the portable place of worship, and were consecrated by Moses for their office (chs. 28, 29).

The priests' principal duties were to offer sacrifices daily and upon the appointed feast days, as acts of worship, so that God would, symbolically, dwell among His people (29:44,45) and so be accessible to their thanksgivings and their supplications for forgiveness. The process of obtaining forgiveness and reconciliation with God involved the sacrifice of a specified animal as a sin offering. In this the priest acted as mediator, offering the blood upon the altar: "So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin, and it shall be forgiven him" (Lev. 4:26,31,35, etc.).

The limitations of this system of priesthood are made clear in the letter to the Hebrews. First, the priests were themselves sinners, in need of forgiveness: "if the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, then let him offer to the LORD for his sin . . ." (Lev. 4:3-12). Consequently, they themselves were mortal: "there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing" (Heb. 7:23). Secondly, it was necessary to repeat the offerings again and again, each time a new sin was committed, showing that they did not truly deal with men's sins: "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins . . . And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (10:4,11).

A superior priesthood

The Levitical system of priesthood is thus seen to have been a temporary one, foreshadowing the true means by which God would choose to offer men complete and lasting forgiveness, through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. He would be both *perfect* sacrifice and *immortal* priest. Jesus made both possible since, though fully sharing the nature of mortal man, he was totally submissive to his Father's will: "though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered. And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:8,9).

The priesthood of Jesus is of a superior order, established by God and confirmed by oath in a remarkable psalm of David: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool' . . . The LORD has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'" (110:1,4). This Melchizedek was a king and also priest in Salem (Jerusalem), long before the time of Aaron's priesthood. He encountered Abraham and pronounced a blessing upon him: "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand'" (Gen. 14:18-20).

This 'order' thus combines the roles of king and priest; Jesus has been Divinely appointed *High Priest*, superior even to Melchizedek (Heb. 3:1), and future ruler of God's Kingdom on the earth, from David's throne in Jerusalem (Lk. 1:31-33). He has been granted immortality and exalted to heaven itself, and now exercises an eternal priesthood, in the very presence of God: "For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb. 9:24).

Jesus' position as High Priest is emphasised in the letter to the Hebrews because its recipients, first-century Jewish Christians, were in danger of turning back to Judaism and the Levitical priesthood of the temple, which had now been superseded. It was necessary to show them that Jesus is the one person in all history worthy to perform this role, making redundant any need for an earthly priesthood. This was demonstrated by the action of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest who condemned Jesus: upon Jesus' acknowledgement that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, Caiaphas tore his clothes (Mk. 14:63), an action forbidden under the Law (Lev. 21:10), and thus symbolically brought the Levitical priesthood to an end.

At the same time, the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17, delivered possibly in the temple courts shortly before his arrest and trial, has often been referred to as the prayer of the High Priest. In it the Lord makes intercession for his disciples and for their unity in him: "Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given me, that they may be one as we are" (v. 11).

A great High Priest

In the grace of God, true believers in the hope of Israel have been provided with a sinless advocate, a great High Priest in the very presence of God. The 'priests' of Christendom have no Scriptural sanction for their claim to intercede for men and women: "For there is one God and *one Mediator* between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time" (1 Tim. 2:5,6).

Furthermore, he is a mediator fully aware of our trials and problems: "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15,16). This is far from a theoretical or abstract concept: the priesthood of Jesus is real and powerful in the life of his disciples as he pleads their cause before the throne of the Father.

* Quotations from the NKJV except where stated otherwise.