

The Need for a Priest

by Ray C. Stedman

In the book of Leviticus, as in all of the Bible, God is teaching us truth about ourselves. In the Old Testament he does it with what we call “visual aids” – pictures he draws for us by means of the sacrifices, rituals, and ceremonies he prescribes. It takes God to understand man. And he has written a book to go along with us – an instruction book to accompany the machinery he has designed.

If you buy a new television set, refrigerator, or automobile, along with it you get an instruction book compiled by the manufacturer, who understands the machine best. It tells you what to do when things go wrong. That is exactly what the Bible does. It is the greatest book on human psychology in the whole world. Our problem is that we tend to ignore it. A modern parable we so frequently need to heed is: “When all else fails, follow directions!”

Another trouble we have is that we start with the last part of the book, the New Testament, which contains much truth which at first is too advanced for us. That is why the Old Testament was written. It starts at the kindergarten level – with pictures – and these pictures are most illuminating. That is why we are spending our time with this Old Testament book of Leviticus.

Since we have come to a subdivision in the book it might help us to take a few minutes for review. Leviticus falls into two major divisions. The first sixteen chapters are God’s revelation to us of what humanity is like and of his provision to meet our needs. The remainder of the book spells out the performance God expects from us on the basis of

the provision he has made. God never mentions performance without first having talked to us about provision. We tend to get mixed up and put the performance first and thus scare everybody to death so that they won’t even listen to the provision. But God always puts things in the right order.

In past weeks we have been studying some of this revelation about humanity. There are four great truths in this first division of Leviticus that we need to know:

- First we need to realize that we need a sacrifice, a substitute. No man can handle his own problems by himself. Humanity in general is unable to solve its problems by itself. That is the lesson of history. And yet isn’t it strange that as century after century goes by and men wrestle with the same problems in every age but no one ever really seems to learn from that process that we can’t solve them ourselves. Every generation faces the same old problems. And each generation thinks that it alone is really coming to grips with them, that the old generation “blew it” but that the new one is finally going to solve them. But it never happens. God makes very clear that we need a substitute. And that substitute will meet the basic needs of our human life for love, for joy, for peace, for forgiveness before God, and for restoration of relationship with our fellow man. That is what the five sacrifices of Leviticus 1-7 have taught us.

- The second thing God stresses is that we need a priest. We cannot solve our problems even though the sacrifice is provided; there is still need for further help. We will see this in the section we begin this morning with Chapter 8.
- Then, third, we need the revelation of a standard, a measuring stick for life. We need to know what is right and what is wrong, what things are helpful and what are harmful, what will advance us and what will impede us. God gives us this in the section following this one.
- Finally, we need an opportunity to act, and God provides that in the last section of this first division of the book.

Now we want to take a look at this second provision God has made for our humanity – that of **a priest**. No Israelite could offer a sacrifice by himself. He had to have a priest because he needed instruction, he needed somebody to explain the meaning of the sacrifice to him. After it was explained and its value made clear, he needed to have it applied to himself. He needed reassurance that this was something God took seriously, that it was not just an empty ritual but that it accomplished something on his behalf. Then he needed help with the emotional and intellectual problems aroused by the sin and struggle in his life. And God knew all this. He knows that we don't understand ourselves. So he has supplied us with a priesthood.

The basic reason we need a priest is that none of us can see ourselves. We see each other better than we see ourselves. God is always trying to teach us this – even by our physical experience. For instance, you know that you can't look at your own face. By yourself you can't tell the color of your eyes nor the shape of your nose. You have no idea what your face really looks like – without a mirror. A priest is a mirror, another human being standing before us by which we can see a reflection of what we are like. We don't even understand the problems we need to have solved without that kind of help. And God knowing that, and having designed us that way, has given us a priesthood which is particularly skilled and adept at meeting those needs.

You can see from this that the priests were, in a sense, the psychiatrists of the Old Testament. They were the ones to whom people came when they had emotional problems – *hangups*, we call them today.

Priests were skilled at handling problems of guilt and fear and anxiety and hostility, and all the traumas and neuroses and psychoses which can arise out of these. And though I have considerable respect for psychology and psychiatry, nevertheless, I am convinced that these Old Testament priests knew more about human nature than most modern practitioners of these disciplines because they were taught by God himself. So when you read about the priesthood, and see what these priests do, you need to realize that they were not merely conducting religious performances. They were fulfilling the tremendous need of the people for help with their problems. And this is what the priesthood will do for us as we see what it means in our own lives.

Verses 1-4 give us an introduction to this whole subject by describing in very brief compass **the essentials for a priesthood**, the ingredients which make it possible:

The LORD said to Moses, "Take Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments and the anointing oil, and the bull of the sin offering, and the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble all the congregation at the door of the tent of meeting." And Moses did as the LORD commanded him; and the congregation was assembled at the door of the tent of meeting. {Lev 8:1-4 RSV}

There God lists for us all the necessary elements for a priesthood:

1. You may have missed the first item on the list. It is the very first few words of the passage: "The LORD said to Moses..."

You see, first comes the word of God. A true priesthood never originates from man's conception of what he needs. It comes from God's word, God's thoughts. God knows us and he has designed this for us. It doesn't come from a pope, nor a council, nor a convention, nor a synod of bishops, nor any other form of human committee. As we will see, this priesthood involves every believer. It is really an expression of the truth that the members of the body of Christ are to minister to one another. And we need to make clear right at the start that this is God's idea, not man's, and that

he initiated the whole process. It began with the word of God.

2. The second element is Aaron and his sons with him. Aaron was the half-brother of Moses. He had a family of boys and these sons were to be associated with him in the priesthood. He and his descendants were the only family in the entire Old Testament authorized to serve as priests. And in this family Aaron himself was to be the chief priest, the high priest.

All of this is beautifully designed by God to teach us truth about ourselves. For, as the book of Hebrews makes very clear, we too have a high priest. Aaron is the picture of that great high priest, Jesus Christ our Lord. And his priesthood is as necessary to us as Aaron's was to the Israelites. When we read about Aaron by himself, serving as high priest, we are looking at a picture of Jesus and of what he can be to us.

If you don't understand this priesthood of Jesus to you today then you are missing out on a great part of your Christian heritage. This is the reason why so many people have a boring Christian life. They don't know the provision God has made for them. And they have so much struggle and weakness because they don't understand the resources which are available to them to meet them in their need and to alleviate their emotional depression. That is why God is teaching us here by this process.

While Aaron is a picture of our great high priest, his sons represent every believer in Jesus Christ, assembled with Christ and serving also as priests. In other words, everyone who knows Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is constituted a priest to the other members of the human family, both to the world at large and to the rest of the body of Christ.

Now, some denominations have a priesthood in which certain men are set aside to serve as priests. I have no objection to that – except that it is not to be exclusive. The true priesthood is not limited to a certain class of people. Every believer, man or woman alike, is a priest. You find this clearly taught in the New Testament: In the book of Revelation, John says that Jesus has made us “a kingdom of priests unto God,” {Rev 1:6 KJV}. Peter says that we have been built into a spiritual house as

living stones, so that we might be a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable unto God {cf, 1 Pet 2:5}.

It is extremely important that we understand what it means to be a priest. It is exciting to be a priest because here we are dealing with all the basic emotional problems that individuals have and are learning how to solve them. So one of the great lessons this book is going to teach us is how to serve effectively as priests to one another and to God.

3. The third ingredient of the priesthood is the garments. A little later on, Moses describes them for us. He is God's representative, and is acting here on God's behalf. He is told to take with him the priests' garments in preparation for the consecration of the priesthood. In the symbolism of Scripture, garments are always a revelation of the character of the individual who wears them. So as we examine this list of garments we will understand what a priest is, what he does, and how he functions.
4. The fourth ingredient of the priesthood is the anointing oil, which, in Scripture, always speaks of the Holy Spirit. This means that a priest, to be effective, always must be walking in the Spirit. You will never be an effective priest unless you learn the ministry of the Holy Spirit, learn how he works in you and through you, imparting the life of Christ to others through you.
5. The next ingredient is the sacrifices. Moses is told to take the bull and the two rams. These always speak of redemption, of the need for dealing with the problem of sin and guilt. Since Aaron and his sons were but men, they too needed sacrifices. But the sacrifices were also food. They were what the priests were to eat, what they were to feed on, what they were to live by. As we come to that we will understand more about what that means.
6. The sixth element of the priesthood was the fact that God told Moses to bring all the congregation together. God insisted on that. He wanted all the adults there, and all the children as well. He wanted the humblest and the greatest in Israel to be present. So Moses had to assemble the whole congregation – more than a million people. That must have created quite a

seating problem! Perhaps they erected grandstands. But in any event they were all to be there in order that God himself might teach them what a priesthood meant. He didn't want anyone to miss it because this was for everyone.

7. Finally, the seventh element was that they were to assemble in front of the tent of meeting, the tabernacle. As we have already seen, the tabernacle is a picture of man. It was built on the pattern upon which we are built. It was a three-fold entity; just as we have body, soul, and spirit, so the tabernacle had a three-fold layout. This is God's way of telling us that he himself will teach us what all this means and that he will do so from within ourselves, from the place where God meets man. Remember that Paul says, "We have received the Spirit of God, by which we might know the things pertaining to God," {cf, 1 Cor 2:12}. God will teach us from within, from the tent of meeting where we live, and will make all this clear to our minds and hearts as we study it together.

That is an introduction to the priesthood. And, beginning here, as Moses was led step by step to give us the account, we will read of the process by which God called this priesthood into being. This morning we will have time to take only one or two steps.

Now, this is going to be very dull and boring to you if you don't see yourself here, if you don't understand that *this is related to you!* You have a great high priest, of whom Aaron is always the picture. And, in fact, *you* are a priest and *you* have the ministry which will be outlined as we study this through.

The **first step** is found in Verses 5-6:

And Moses said to the congregation, "This is the thing which the LORD has commanded to be done." And Moses brought Aaron and his sons, and washed them with water. {Lev 8:5-6 RSV}

What does that signify?

I hope you are learning to read your Bibles carefully, because God always puts things together. Two things are brought together here which furnish

a clue, a key to help us understand what this means. Don't ignore them.

Moses said, "This is the thing which the LORD has commanded to be done." That is, "This is the word of God." And then he washed Aaron and his sons with water. Thus *the word and water* are linked together.

In the New Testament, the third chapter of the Gospel of John, you remember that Jesus said to Nicodemus, that religious intellectual who came to him by night, "Except a man be born of water and of the wind, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God," {cf. John 3:5}. What did he mean? Well, water stands for the Word, and wind stands for the Spirit. And except a man be born by believing the Word, thus releasing the operation of the Spirit of God into his life, he can never enter into the kingdom of God. So the word, in its capacity to cleanse and to purify, is pictured for us by water. Jesus uses the same symbol in the fifteenth chapter of John. He says to his disciples, "Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you," {cf, John 15:3}.

In the seventeenth chapter {of John}, in his great high priestly prayer, Jesus says of his own, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth," {John 17:14, 17:17-19 RSV}. That is the fulfillment of what we are reading about back here in Leviticus. Jesus, the only one fit to do so, consecrated himself as the great high priest by the washing of the water of the word.

And here Aaron, as his picture, or type, is consecrated with water by Moses. Then the sons are similarly washed. It is by the proclamation of the word that the priesthood operates, and only by that. By that it is prepared for its ministry.

The second step is **the dressing of the high priest in his garments**. Verse 7:

And he put on him [not on the sons but only on Aaron himself] the coat, and girded him with the girdle, and clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod upon him, and girded him with the skillfully woven band of the ephod, binding it to him therewith. And he placed the breastpiece on him, and

in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim. And he set the turban upon his head, and on the turban, in front, he set the golden plate, the holy crown, as the LORD commanded Moses. {Lev 8:7-9 RSV}

This whole ensemble is God's idea.

What are the meanings of these garments? Well, if you simply follow the exciting pattern of the Old Testament you are given clues as to what Jesus Christ is prepared to be and to do in your life, for the garments reflect the character and the quality of the great high priest. Let's look at them:

A. When Moses began dressing him Aaron didn't have anything on. He had just been washed with water and he was naked. Then, at the command of God, Moses put an inner garment upon him, a white linen coat of sorts, which fit closely around Aaron's body and served as his undergarment. He bound it around him with an inner girdle. After Aaron was fully dressed these two items were invisible. And yet each has its own significance.

a) In Scripture a coat is always a picture of the righteousness of an individual. This inner coat is a picture of that inner, hidden righteousness of the Lord Jesus which only God could see. Jesus had a purity within – which God could discern but man could not. That is why the Father spoke as he did at the baptism of Jesus, which took place after almost thirty years of life in the town of Nazareth. Many have wondered what kind of a person Jesus was as a growing boy. Did he ever misbehave and get into trouble? The Father spoke from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," {Matt 3:17}. There was nothing at all wrong inside. He had that inner righteousness.

b) A girdle, in Scripture, always symbolizes a servant. This inner girdle represents that inner spirit of servitude, that willingness to be a servant which our Lord reflects, and again which man could not see but which God the Father saw. Do you remember how Paul puts it in Philippians? He says that Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a

thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross," {Phil 2:6-8 RSV}. It is that inner willingness to stoop and meet us at our lowest need which is characteristic of the life of our great high priest.

B. Over these garments Moses put the outer robe. This is described in Exodus {28:31-34, 39:22-26} as an exquisite robe of finely woven cloth, all of one piece and colored a brilliant and beautiful blue. Again this robe speaks of righteousness, but, in this case, the visible righteousness which men could see. Jesus challenged his critics, saying, "Which of you convinces me of sin?" {cf, John 8:46}. That is, "Here is my life. Look it over. Do you find any fault in it?" No one could. Even Pilate, the Roman official who examined his life judicially, was compelled to say, "I find no fault in him." He had that outward, visible righteousness which man could see.

C. Over the robe was put the ephod. This was a kind of vestment, a surplice, or tunic, which hung from the shoulders of the priest down to his knees. It was always the mark of the high priest's authority because it hung from his shoulders, which in Scripture are the symbol of authority and power. In promising the coming of Jesus, Isaiah says, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder," {Isa 9:6a RSV}. By this ephod we are reminded of Jesus' words just before he ascended into the heavens. He said to his disciples, "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth," {Matt 28:18b KJV}.

I would like to stress that, because we tend to think that he has power in heaven, yes, but that men can turn aside his purposes on earth. That is not true. All power is given to him in heaven and on earth. He is able to act as he chooses. Half the trouble of the church today is that we have forgotten the source of our power, have lost sight of the fact that we have a high priest who is authoritative, whose word carries weight, who "opens and no man shuts; and shuts and no man opens," {cf, Rev 3:7 RSV}.

When you ask him to act on your behalf and he does so there is nothing which can stop him. We need to keep our eyes on this priest of power, this high priest who is able to undergird us in the midst of this troubled, confused, and mixed-up world. Otherwise we will lose all sense of control in life and will just drift about frightened and upset.

- D. Around the ephod was bound the golden girdle, a very beautiful band of cleverly woven cloth intertwined with gold. Again, the girdle is a picture of the servitude of Jesus, but in this case his outward servant character, i.e., his obvious willingness to stoop to meet our need, whatever it is. This means that our great high priest, with all his power and authority, is willing to meet us right where we are.

You don't need to pop a pill and have your mind expanded before you can find God. He will meet you. He is great enough and powerful enough and good enough to meet you right where you are, on his terms, and as a servant to stoop to your weakness.

Remember that in the upper room Jesus bound a towel around himself and began to wash his disciples' feet. Thus he manifested his willingness to meet their need even when they were ashamed of it, and ashamed of themselves. Peter tried to reject this ministry. But the Lord said, "There was no way you can be helped, Peter, if you do not accept my servant character," {cf, John 13:4-17}.

So here is this high priest, bound with a girdle to remind us that Jesus is willing to be our servant and to meet us at the place of our need.

- E. Then, in the middle of Aaron's breast, Moses hung the breastpiece. This was a square of gold on which were written the names of all twelve tribes of Israel. Thus Israel was reminded that the high priest held closest to his heart, in affectionate concern, every one of the people of Israel. As this is applied through Jesus to all God's people it has the tremendously reassuring meaning that our Lord Jesus always holds close to his heart, in very deep, affectionate concern, the needs of every one of his own. He is deeply involved with each of us. He knows where you are and what you are going through. He is greatly concerned about it.

Once you realize this you need never be discouraged again, because Jesus holds you close to his heart.

- F. In the midst of the breastpiece, Moses put the two instruments called the Urim and Thummim. Now, what are these? No one really knows. Strangely enough they are never described in the Bible. Even the ancient rabbis lost any description of what these looked like.

Their names mean "Lights" and "Perfections." And, though we don't know what they looked like, we know what they were for. Clearly they were used by the priests to determine the mind and the will of God concerning specific events. Whenever a king, or even an ordinary person, desired to know what God wanted him to do, he came to the priest, and, through the Urim and the Thummim, the priest was able to help him. It was the way to find direction in life.

We are getting very close to the true meaning of these when we translate the words *Insights* and *Outworkings*. You see, "lights" are insights. And "perfections" are the outworkings of circumstances to accomplish the goal God has in mind. When a problem arose, an individual brought it to the priest who would use these instruments to gain insight from God into the nature of the problem. Then he also received assurance from God that the way God was moving would work the problem out to perfection. As you well know, if you have had any experience as a Christian, this corresponds exactly with what the Spirit of God does in our hearts through the Word of God and through the counsel of other members of the priesthood of God. He helps us to gain an understanding of the problem and to have reassurance that he is working out his perfect purposes in our lives.

My patron saint, Dr. H. A. Ironside, used to tell of a young man who was a recent graduate of a theological seminary. Educated beyond his intelligence, he had arrived at the spot where he thought he knew all the answers to all the theological problems. He came to a certain town where there lived an old Christian layman who had never been to a Bible school, nor a seminary, but had taught himself the Word of God under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit. In a very humble way he had gained a

reputation as a man of wise counsel. When this young theologian heard about him, he said, "I'd like to meet that man. I think I could ask him a question or two that he couldn't answer!" So a meeting was arranged. The first thing the young man said was, "Sir, I hear that you have quite a reputation as a Bible student. I'd like to ask you a question." The old man said, "Well, I don't know if I can answer it but I'd be glad to try. What is your question?" The young man said, "Tell me, what were the Urim and the Thummim?" The old man thought a moment, then said, "Well, sir, I don't really know – and I don't think anyone else does either. We do know the names mean 'Lights' and 'Perfections' and that these were instruments by which the high priest could determine the mind of God in specific instances. Beyond that I don't think I could go. But you know, I've found that if you change just one letter in these words you have the instrument by which I can know the mind and will of God for me, in my life." The young man was a bit puzzled. "What do you mean?" The old man said, "Well, if you change the 'r' in Urim to an 's', you'll make it 'Usim and Thummim.' And when I want to know the mind of God, I just take the pages of my Bible and I 'usim and thummim.' And, by that means, I can learn what I need to know!"

I don't know how theologically accurate that is but I think the old man had arrived at a very practical approach to exactly what the Urim and Thummim were for in the Old Testament day.

- G. On the head of the priest Moses set a turban, a beautiful cloth bound around his head. This is a symbolic picture of the mind under control, the intelligence of the priest in subjection to the workings of God. It represents what Paul describes in Second Corinthians as "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ," {2 Cor 10:5 KJV}. The priesthood is to use its intelligence under the control of the mind and will of God. This is what our great high priest does. He embodies all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and works intelligently on our behalf under the control of the mind and will and purpose of God the Father in our lives. And that is what we also are to do,

as priests, as we begin to understand the things of God.

- H. Finally, squarely in the middle of the turban Moses set the golden plate which is called the crown of the high priest. Only the high priest wore it. Inscribed on it were the words, "Holiness to the LORD." As we have already learned from the book of Leviticus the word *holiness* really means "wholeness." God's purpose among men is to make us into whole people again. This is a beautiful picture of how our great high priest always holds in public purview his ultimate purpose in our lives: to make us whole before the Lord. And as the Lord Jesus works in your life and mine this is what he is working toward.

The book of Hebrews tells us "We have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities. He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin," {cf, Heb 4:15 KJV}.

- He has known discouragement and the way it feels.
- He has known hostility and the contradiction against himself of people who were intent upon sabotaging every effort he made.
- He has wept with those who wept.
- He was angry when he saw injustice stalking the earth unopposed.
- He got indignant with those who were oppressing others.
- He spoke scorching words to those who stood in the way of people who were seeking help.
- He understands how men feel.
- He knows how you feel.
- He knows where you are!

Whatever your problem may be at this moment, he has been where you are. He has all power and he has a servant heart, ready to meet you at your place of need. And he knows how to work your problems out. The reason we are so weak and so faltering, as people of God, is that we lose sight of this great high priest who is so capable, and so ready to meet us right where we are, and who is available to us twenty-four hours a day.

The Need for a Priest

God would have us focus our eyes again upon this One who is equipped with all that it takes to meet all of our needs.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we pray that you will take our eyes away from our problems. We are sometimes so emotionally caught up in them that we just keep wallowing in our difficulties and worrying about them, and we get anxious, fretful, and angry over them. Help us to lift our eyes unto this

great high priest who is within us, ready to meet us right at the door of the tent of meeting, right in the heart of our own individual lives, and to release to us there all the mighty resources available to him. Help us to begin to lay hold of these resources and to understand that you are not trifling with your people, but that you are very serious about meeting our needs and have made a realistic provision which works. Help us to take this seriously, we ask in Jesus' great name, Amen.

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