

The Present Glory

by Ray C. Stedman

This has been one of the toughest years I have ever put in, this summer especially. I have mentioned before that a problem of grave concern to my heart, a heavy burden laid upon me, has taxed me to a great degree. Several times during the summer the situation reached a state of crisis in which I felt extremely pressured, even oppressed. And every such time my own personal prayer seemed to be unavailing. I had never in my life prayed as much, but I wasn't getting any relief – no matter how long I prayed. But each time God sent me just the right person, at precisely the proper moment, to say a word which helped me. Sometimes they weren't even aware of it. Other times they were. On one occasion I had reached the point where I felt I was beating my head against a brick wall and emotionally and physically I was about to break with the strain when a man came to town from out of state. He told me afterward that he hadn't really any reason to come through here – he just did. I had been thinking about him and wishing I could talk with him – when suddenly I learned he was here. We met for lunch and he said a few words to me which simply delivered me!

We have all had experiences like this. They are ways in which God underscores to us the need for a priest – for that is the process of priesthood. That is the ministry of a fellow-priest in the body of Christ.

This is a great truth which the church has largely lost sight of in our generation. Martin Luther rediscovered it back in the days of the Reformation when he brought to light again what he called “the priesthood of every believer,” the capacity each of us has to be used in the life of someone else to help him by the power of God in a time of intellectual or emotional struggle. That is the subject we are examining in the eighth and ninth

chapters of Leviticus as we are studying through the provisions God makes for the basic needs of our humanity.

We have already seen how he meets the need to be loved, and to love in return, the need for peace, the need to have our guilt removed, and the need for restoration of relationship with others. All of these are so beautifully symbolized in the visual aids God has given us in the five offerings of Leviticus.

And then we came to the need for a priest. We have seen that here too God has made ample provision – first of all in the great high priest he has given to us, our Lord Jesus. He is the underlying resource of every Christian. If there is any truth which needs to be recaptured and lived again in our daily experience it is the availability of the Lord Jesus as our great high priest, as he is symbolized by Aaron in the Old Testament.

And with Aaron were his sons, who are a picture of the priesthood of the believer, of the ministry each of us can have with one another in meeting the emotional and intellectual problems of life.

In our last study together we looked in the eighth chapter at the process of priesthood, tracing the way by which God produces priests. This began, you remember, with the washing, clothing, and the anointing with oil of Aaron as the high priest, beautifully picturing what Jesus Christ has been set apart by the Holy Spirit to do – both in the days of his flesh, and now in his risen life through the work of the Spirit in our lives today. Oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and his activity. Then the sons of Aaron gathered with him to share this priesthood. They too went through the process of being washed, clothed, and anointed, not only with oil but also with blood, symbolizing the necessity for cleansing from sin in their lives and in ours. Finally at the end of Chapter 8 we found them feast-

ing together in the tabernacle on the thigh of the ordination offering and the bread of the cereal offering, symbols of strength and life imparted to them by the sacrifice made on their behalf, pictures of our life in Christ. And, you recall, Moses then gave strict orders for Aaron and his sons to stay in the tabernacle for seven days and not to leave, lest they die.

Now, the ninth chapter continues this process and introduces us to the final steps in becoming priests. It opens with a very instructive word:

On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel; {Lev 9:1 RSV}

I hope you are becoming familiar with the significance of numbers as well as the other various symbols employed in the Old Testament. They are God's wonderful visual aids to help us understand truth which is very important to us.

The eighth day is highly significant! Eight is the number of a new beginning – a resurrection, in other words. So the eighth day is a symbol of resurrection life. This is not mere guesswork. Not only is this number used this way consistently throughout the Old Testament and the New, but it is also stamped right into nature itself:

- For instance, there is the week. Today is the eighth day. It is the beginning of a new week. We have just lived through the seven days of the past week and now we are beginning again. One of the strange mysteries of human life is the week. It is easy to explain why we have months. They correspond to the phases of the moon. The year, of course, is the time it takes the earth to revolve around the sun. But no one can explain why we have the week. Nothing in the physical world corresponds with it. Yet from the earliest times the human family has observed the week.
- Or consider the tones of the musical scale. You know that an octave consists of seven notes with an eighth note which is the first of a new octave. Do, re, me, fa, so, la, ti, do.

So eight corresponds to a new note, a new day, a new beginning.

By this means God is teaching us that the process of priesthood, the ministry of being a priest, must be on the basis of resurrection power. We must trust in the resurrected life of a living Lord within us – new life, a new beginning – not in the natural resources of our old life, with its attempt to garner wisdom from here and there and put it all together and thus to muddle through. We have all been subjected to “good advice” by well-meaning people which, when followed, often has led us into some of the most difficult times of our lives. But here God is wiping all that out. He says, “I don't want you to rest on that. I want you to operate from resurrection life, from the Scriptures understood in the power of the Holy Spirit, and to relate sensitively to the needs of individuals so that the advice you give as priests will not be your wisdom, but mine.” That is what this all means. And that is why Moses insisted that these priests not leave the tabernacle for seven days. God had said, “If you leave before seven days are up, you will die.” By that means he is saying, “Look, don't try to operate as a priest on any basis other than resurrection power. It will never work. You will produce only death if you try to do it in any other way!”

That very instructive word can be such a help to us, for this is the problem with which much of the church today. I have just returned from traveling about in the Middle West, and, once again, I come back somewhat disheartened. Here on the West Coast we are seeing much new life coming into the churches. But in the rest of the nation this is just barely beginning in a few spots. For the most part the evangelical churches are carrying on in a very sterile, dry, dull, empty shell of performance, with services which are appallingly dull and are turning off most of the youth of their areas. Young people are frankly saying so all over the country. What is the reason for this? Well, it is largely because we have substituted for the intended power by which Christians are to live the processes which the world lives on around us. We have substituted slick organization and electronic techniques and high-gear promotion and pressure tactics as the means by which we hope the church will affect the world. But God's people have never moved successfully on that basis, either in the Scriptures or in subsequent history. God is continually striving through his word to teach us that he doesn't depend upon majority vote to win his battles. He always selects just a handful of people.

I was reading an article the other day in which a Christian writer said, evidently with considerable rejoicing, that it looked as if Brazil in the next few years would become the first Protestant nation of Latin America. The church is growing so rapidly in Brazil that soon we might expect 51% of the population to have become Protestant. And that, according to this article, would be the hopeful day when, at last, by the power of numbers, the church could begin to sway the nation. But God never waits for that! He always moves through a handful. It isn't necessary for us to be a majority of the population, ever. God is always teaching us that fact by sending people home, turning them away, driving them back.

Jesus spoke to his disciples and said things that were hard to accept and many began to leave him, John says in Chapter 6 of his gospel. Even the twelve disciples acted as though they too were going to leave. So Jesus said to them, "Will you also go away?" {John 6:67}, with the implication, "Well, if you want to, go. All I need is the power of a living God!" What we need to learn is that when we rely on natural power we thereby forego supernatural power. Natural strength is not enough, and never will be, to do the job.

The reason why we try to depend upon it, though, is revealed in the next section. Beginning with Verse 2 and continuing through Verse 21 we have another section which details for us the offerings that were offered in connection with the ordaining of the priests.

First of all there were offerings for Aaron himself. In Verse 2, Moses said to Aaron,

"Take a bull calf for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, both without blemish, and offer them before the LORD."
{Lev 9:2 RSV}

And in Verse 8 we are told,

So Aaron drew near to the altar, and killed the calf of the sin offering, which was for himself. {Lev 9:8 RSV}

And, in Verse 12, he also killed the burnt offering which was for himself.

And then there were offerings for the people. Verses 3-4:

And say to the people of Israel, "Take a male goat for a sin offering, and a calf and a lamb, both a year old without blemish, for a burnt offering, and an ox and a ram for peace offerings, to sacrifice before the LORD, and a cereal offering mixed with oil; for today the LORD will appear to you."
{Lev 9:3-4 RSV}

These offerings were then sacrificed, as recounted in the rest of this section. So once again we run into the strange prominence of offerings and of blood which pervades this whole portion of the book.

Why does God constantly insist on all this blood? Why was nothing done apart from a sacrifice, a death? Well, you see, God is saying something to us. He is shouting at us! He wants to get across to us a fundamental truth regarding the power of the priesthood. It is that the resurrection power of a living God at work within his people can never be exercised apart from a previous death.

When these Israelites brought their offerings, these innocent animals whose blood had to be shed, whose lives had to be forfeited, they were expected to learn something from the sacrifices. These were not mere rituals they went through to placate an angry God so that they then could go on and live unchanged. They were not an umbrella of protection against the wrath of an angry deity. These offerings were expected to teach the offerer that something had to die within himself. They were not merely offered on behalf of the individual; they were the individual. That is what the offerer had to learn. An offering was a substitute which was accepted only because the person making the offering was identified with it. Something had to happen within him. That is what God is getting across. Of course this symbolizes the end of all the natural resources of life – and this is the key to the use of resurrection power.

On Friday I drove over to Monterey to take part in a Layman's Leadership Institute conference. Leaders from all over the country were invited, and one of the participants was an old friend of mine – many of you know him too – Dr. Don Moomaw. He is pastor of a church in Southern California. Don, you probably remember, was an All-American during his football career at UCLA. One speaker failed to show up on Friday so in his place the conference leader asked Don to share from his

own life and experience what God had taught him. I had never before heard him say what he told us, and it was very moving:

He said that, as a boy growing up, he had fallen in love with football. He played it all through high school and, since he had a large body, a sharp mind, and a dedicated spirit he became a very good player. He went on to college and in his sophomore year was named an All-American. Don told us what happened to him when he became an All-American.

Without realizing quite what was happening he found that every other American had an image of what an All-American was like, and he found himself trying to fill that image. An All-American is deemed a champion at everything he does – and Don said he tried to live up to that.

In his junior year he became a Christian. It wasn't very long before he felt himself drawn by God toward the ministry and so he began to prepare for it. Involved with other Christians, he entered into all their activities. But he found that he was still trying to live up to the image of an All-American – and an All-American is always ahead of everybody else. So if, in a meeting the people, talked about how many verses they had memorized, Don took note of the one who had memorized the most and then memorized 15 more than he. When they talked about how many hours they spent in prayer, he noted who had spent the most time and then spent an extra half hour more than he – because an All-American, you see, never falls short; he is always out ahead of everybody else.

He kept doing this, innocently, without realizing it, finding that he was putting on a facade and living up to an image which was not real. All through his early ministry he found himself always trying to fulfill the expectation of someone else.

(That is a familiar pattern, isn't it? We all live like that at times. We may not be All-Americans but we all have some image we feel is expected of us – some role we feel we must fulfill. And we try to do so, often quite innocently, not always to gain something for ourselves, but because it is expected of us. It is that which is characteristic of the natural life. And that is what God is telling us has to die, has to end.)

Don went on to tell us, in a very moving way, how God had taught him that truth – how, little by little, through humiliation and the experience of weakness and failure, God finally taught him to

stop living up to a facade and to give up trying to be an All-American in everybody's eyes, and just to be himself – to be content with God at work through him. He told us what relief it brought to his heart to find, finally, that he could just be what he was, that he could express his humanity in the way that God had put it together for him, filled with God's Spirit and saying what he himself felt led to say and not worrying about what someone else thought about it. And Don related in very simple yet eloquent terms how this had set him free.

That is what God is after. That is what he is talking about here. That is what this means! This is not just so much theological theory. These are not merely ancient rituals which are only an archaic curiosity to us today. God is trying to impart to us, clearly and definitely, a principle of life which will mean the difference between success and failure, between fulfillment and denial! What he is getting across to us is that the natural life must end!

Isn't that what Jesus says? Do you remember how he put it? "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone; but if it die it brings forth ... life," {cf, John 12:24 KJV}. Death precedes life. "All life that is worth living," God is saying, "comes out of death. It is never the other way around." We don't like that dying. We don't like losing that desire to fulfill an image. We want to fulfill our role. We don't like the idea that somebody might find out that we are not all they expect us to be, and so we resist this dying. But our Lord is telling us that this is the only way we will ever find life. Jesus says that if a man tries to hold on to his life, if he tries to save his life, he will lose it. If you try to hang on to life and squeeze all you can out of it – try to follow the world's rule: "Watch out for yourself, for 'old number one'; no one else is going to! Get yours while you can!" – you will find that life filters through your fingers. You can't hang on to it; it's gone, and you are left with an empty shell of all you tried to preserve. And how many are discovering that to be true these days! But, as Jesus said, if you throw it away, "If you lose your life for my sake," you will save it, {cf, Matt 10:39}. Just give it up and you will save it.

That is exactly what is being taught here, back in the Old Testament. This is not New Testament truth alone, at all. It is an unalterable principle of Christian life. God is saying that out of death

comes life. And when, on the basis of a death, we are ready to surrender this dependence upon our natural resources and strength, then we can lay hold of the supernatural strength of a living Lord acting in resurrection power – not only for us but for others as well when we minister to them.

Look at the result now, in Verse 22:

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting; and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. And fire came forth from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat upon the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. {Lev 9:22-24 RSV}

What a dramatic scene! The whole camp of Israel, a million or more people, are somehow gathered at vantage points where they can observe what is happening in the open space before the door of the tabernacle, where the brazen altar is located. They watch Aaron and his sons kill these animals and put them on the altar and sprinkle the blood and pour it out. When everything is completed exactly as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron go together into the tabernacle. A hush falls on the whole assembly – no one knows what is going to happen.

Then Moses and Aaron come out again and they blessed the people. And suddenly the glory of the LORD appears. What was that? As best we can determine from other Scriptures it was a shining cloud of light, the Shekinah, a radiant glory of light which suddenly appeared and filled the whole area. Later it was to take up residence in the tabernacle, in the holy of holies where it was suspended over the ark of the covenant. But here it appears before all the people. And then a supernatural fire proceeds from it which consumes in a flash all the rest of the offerings upon the altar. A most impressive scene! No wonder the people fall on their faces and shout. This is a shout of victory, an expression of their sense of awe and wonder at the fact that the God of glory is in their midst.

Now, put this all together.

All of this is designed, as Paul says in First Corinthians 10, for our instruction. This is God's way of teaching us. What is the lesson? Well, there is a counterpart in our lives.

We are to be priests like these, and the objective of priesthood is to produce the glory of the LORD. That is what is manifest when the priesthood is operating properly. When all is done as God commands, then it works out to produce the glory of the LORD and the fire of God. The counterpart of that glory in our lives today is the beauty of the character of Jesus. The New Testament says that the Spirit of God is at work in our hearts to produce glory unto glory. And Paul, in Second Corinthians 4 says that the glory of God is found "in the face of Jesus Christ" {2 Cor 4:6 KJV}. So it is God's character, the character of Jesus, appearing in you and in me in our daily encounters with people, which is represented by the glory of the LORD here in Leviticus.

Last week in Illinois I spoke to a breakfast group on Saturday morning. I noticed a woman in the audience who had a patch covering her right eye and cheek and much of her nose. Yet the part of her face that I could see was radiant. I wondered who she was. At the end of the meeting she came up to me, and took my hand, and thanked me, saying how much she had enjoyed the time and how it had ministered to her. I noticed that she had some difficulty talking, but her face was just radiant.

Later on I met her husband and he told me her story. Three or four years ago she discovered that she had cancer of the eye. The eye was removed, but later the cancer reappeared and she had to have more surgery – this time removing part of the bone around the eye. Again she had to go back and this time they removed part of her nose and cheekbone. And a fourth time she had to return for further operations, and now practically half of her face is gone. But her husband told me of the joy in which this woman lives continually, an unbroken sense of joy which floods her being and which she has to express all the time. Though she has had plenty of struggles and times of resentment and bitterness, still God has led her into joy.

Her husband said, "You know, she wasn't like that before. She was a complaining woman who whined about everything. But God has used this disease to bring her to a sense of peace and has turned all that complaint and sorrow and malcon-

tentment into joy!” She was in the body-life service we had there last Sunday night and she shared something of the joyful spirit she now has. I felt led to ask her to pray for everybody in that congregation who was struggling with their circumstances, complaining and resisting and rejecting where God had put them, that they might learn that wonderful ministry of priesthood which changes circumstances into joy.

Remember that Jesus said to his disciples in the moment of their agony when they were facing the cross with him and dreading the loneliness that his departure would mean, “Your sorrows will be turned into joy,” {cf, John 16:20}. And it was predicted of Jesus in the book of Isaiah that he would come and bring “beauty for ashes” {Isa 61:3b KJV}, the oil of joy for the spirit of mourning, that his coming would turn these things into inner joy.

This is the purpose of his priesthood. And it is the purpose of your priesthood in the lives of others – that you might enter into their circumstances with sensitivity toward the individuals involved, and that the words you speak are able to release them from their outward despair and turn it around into inner joy and glory.

That is what God is saying to us.

There is no glory without this process of priesthood, but the purpose of priesthood is that the glory of the LORD might be manifest.

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for this time of teaching together. How deeply you have instructed us from your Word. We pray that we may understand it, take it seriously, and realize that this indeed is the joy of our ministry, and the joy of your ministry in our lives as well. Help us to stop resisting what you are doing with us. Help us to stop our complaining and our griping and our murmuring against your processes, and to accept this death, this dying to the feeding of our self-image, our desire to appear to be something that we are not, to fulfill a role and uphold a facade. Because we know that out of that death, Lord, will come your life. And we pray that your life will characterize us, that the glory of the Lord may be seen in us. We ask in your name, Amen.