



## PRIESTHOOD IN THE BIBLE

To begin this new series, we're going to explore 4 developments of this unfolding, rich, and varied theme in Scripture, that really is of fundamental significance to **every** Christian.

Because as 1 Peter 2:9 states:

*"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."*

**Q: How do you understand the idea of being a priest?**

To help us comprehend this biblical theme of priesthood, it is important we go right back to the Bible's beginning.

### HUMANS AS PRIESTS

The book of Genesis reveals that humans are priests in God's temple, this world.

Where do we see this?

When we read of God creating the universe in Genesis, and read it side by side with the account of the dedication of the Jerusalem temple (2 Chr 7:9; 1 Kgs 8:65), we find they share this curious experience: they each happen over 7 days.

- With the consecration of the tabernacle and temple, seven speeches from Moses<sup>1</sup> and Solomon<sup>2</sup> also match God's sevenfold word, 'And it was good!'
- When God finishes his creative work in Genesis (Gen 2:1), as well as in the construction of the wilderness tabernacle (Ex 39:32), the same words declare: 'the work was completed'.

With the repeated links of creation with Israel's holy sanctuaries, we get the sense that God's trying to tell us something: when He made the universe, he was fashioning a holy temple to dwell in.

<sup>1</sup> Ex 25:1-30:10; 30:11-16; 30:17-21; 30:22-23; 30:34-37; 31:12-17.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 8:31-32, 33-34, 35-37a, 37b-40, 41-43, 44-45, 46-53.

**Q: What do you make of this idea of the world as God's temple-dwelling place?**

**Q: If you agree that this was God design, do you think the world still is this sacred space?**

**Q: How does our belief shape how we relate to the created world?**

We see this assertion of the world as God's temple confirmed when we read that he makes humans as His image.

In the cultural setting when Genesis was written, the surrounding nations understood the image of the gods only as three things: an idol statue, a king, and a priest.

The idol statue, supposedly animated and infused with the spirit of the gods, was then placed in a temple at the finalising of its construction to signify the god's rest — their enthronement, and presence in the realm.

The king, as the image of the gods, was also said to represent and extend the rule of the gods.

And the priest, as the image, had access to the gods and represented the people to the gods, they maintained the integrity of the temple complex, and served to permeate the blessing of the gods back to the people.

Genesis challenges this cultural script to say, 'no, the image concerns not just three things; rather, all people are the image of God.'

We see this represented by Adam and Eve. Like the supposed experience of the idol statue, humans are brought to life by the breath and Spirit of the God at the conclusion of God's world-making temple project, at which point He then rests on the 7<sup>th</sup> day.

Like a king, they are called to represent God's reign by lovingly ruling and subduing creation through culture-making.

Importantly for our discussion, like priests, they walk closely with the Lord in the cool of the day and were tasked by God to 'work and serve', the very action given to the priests in the tabernacle, by joining God in upholding the sacred order He had established through creation.

**Q: How have you understood the image of God?**

**Q: How does this threefold view shape how you live?**

We know the way the story goes, however. This priestly task is undermined as humans tread a sinful path away from God's good purposes which results in His creation experiencing decay, desecration, and death.

Such a response does not cause humans to lose their status as God's image, as we see confirmed even after the flood story, nor does sin drive God entirely out of His world, for the world is still rife with his glory as the Seraphim in Isaiah 6 declare from heaven, but sin activates a relational chasm between humans and God.

**Q: Where else do we see this relational chasm evident in the world?**

Something must be established to provide a bridging connection to restore the mutual flow of relationship between humanity and God and unify God's total presence in heaven again on earth. And, the LORD responds beautifully by choosing a family, a family of priests.

## ISRAEL AS PRIESTS

God's redemptive plan commences in Genesis 12 when He chooses the aged Abraham and his forthcoming offspring, the nation of Israel.

Abraham's family will have the privilege of being God's special possession, having access to Him alone in the world, and voicing praise to its Creator on behalf of humanity and the created order.

Israel is also tasked with extending blessing back to all people on God's behalf. Through this one priestly family, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

We see this priestly calling take shape when Israel makes its exodus from slavery in Egypt, passes through the Red Sea, and gathers before the LORD at Mount Sinai. There the LORD declares:

### Exodus 19:5-6

*Although the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup>you<sup>[a]</sup> will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'*

At Sinai, however, we learn that due to human evil to which Israel engages in still, even they experience degrees of fear-ridden separation with a holy God. We read:

*<sup>16</sup>On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup>Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.*

*<sup>18</sup>Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain<sup>[b]</sup> trembled violently.*

*<sup>19</sup>As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.*

*<sup>20</sup>The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up <sup>21</sup>and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. <sup>22</sup>Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."*

*<sup>23</sup>Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'"*

### Q: What do you make of this scene?

The limited and varying access to God that we see on the mountain experienced by Moses, the priests, and the people, is replicated with the subsequent tabernacle in the wilderness and later with the Temple, patterned after God's dwelling place in heaven. These structures were part of God's ongoing response to be with humankind again.

Yet, in the tabernacle and temple, as on the mountain, the people could not enter! Their access to God was mediated through a priest.

On a daily basis, the priest would enter the first compartment of the sanctuary and continually offer on Israel's behalf the nation's worship, prayer, and repentance through various sacrifices. Following such an act, the priest would return to the people to convey on God's behalf his renewed blessing, love, and forgiveness.

But within these sanctuaries, God located Himself mainly in the Holy of Holies which only the High Priest could enter. And once a year at that.

This predicament functions, as Paul states in Galatians 3, like that of a teacher, educating us that Israel's priesthood was clearly a temporary measure and something far greater was needed to render enduring union between humankind and God.

**Q: What do you think this whole experience teaches us? What does this arrangement communicate?**

Now, we will take lessons from the ministry of these priests in the Old Covenant over the next few weeks to help us understand our priestly nature further; but ultimately this former priestly system was the 'shadow' and Christ is the reality.

## **CHRIST AS HIGH PRIEST**

Jesus as High Priest utterly changes how we relate to God, inaugurating a New Covenant. He brings us into heaven itself in unhindered proximity with God's presence and then extends from heaven the Father's enduring affirmation to us.

We see this radical shift in our relationship to God depicted emphatically at Jesus' crucifixion when the massive Temple curtain and barrier to God tears open from top to bottom.

We read in Hebrews 10:18 that on the Cross, Jesus' suffering and death is his work as a priest. He presents before God a final sacrifice for the sins of the world, his own body, to open a new and living way to God (10:20).

This new relationship with God occurs furthermore as Jesus' perfect human response of obedience and devotion to God in the world, even to death (2:9; 10:5-7), results in the Father exalting him to the highest place (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 4:4, 6; Phil 2:5-11).

Through Jesus' victorious resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God in heaven, amazingly, we see a human being reigning alongside God to fulfil God's mandate in Genesis of His image ruling and stewarding creation (Heb 2:5-11).

Hebrews 9:24 states that with the human Jesus in the presence of God on behalf of all humanity, He signals the renewed union between humanity and the Father.

**Q: If God has reconciled the world to Himself 'in Christ' (2 Cor 5:19-20), how does He feel about the world?**

This reconciliation and renewed union with God is enjoyed by any who follow Christ and are united with Him, which we celebrate through immersion in the waters of Baptism.

In our union with Jesus, we are bound to him not only in his death and resurrection, but even in his ascension, ascending with him to the right hand of the Father.

The Apostle Paul states this in Ephesians 2:4-6

*'because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup>made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup>And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.'*

Q: What do you make of the idea that 'in Jesus' we are as close as He is to His Father?

Q: What are the implications for us being seated with Jesus?

Q: Hebrews makes out that the tabernacle was a pattern of heaven; and now in Christ we enter the reality, this most holy place in heaven. What are your thoughts and feelings to this claim that we are simultaneously on earth and in heaven?

With Christ taking us in Him into the very presence of God in heaven, as our High Priest He then extends to us the Father's blessing.

Here, God now deems Jesus' perfect human response of love, obedience, and devotion to Him, to be our very response, so that we are holy and blameless in God's sight (Eph 1:4; 2 Cor 5:21).

It means our relationship to God is not grounded or thrown back to our performance; rather, we rest and rely upon Jesus' response for us. We can breathe a sigh of relief.

Also, the unrelenting love and delight that Jesus receives from his Father in closest proximity to Him is now ours, as we are included in his sonship and reign with the Father (Gal 3:26-28).

This stunning proximity to the Father, through union with Jesus, means that the church is now a royal priesthood.

Q: How do you feel about the idea that in Christ we are seen as perfect and wholly loved by the Father?

Q: Can you believe that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more?

Q: Can you believe there nothing we can do to make God love us less?

## CHURCH AS PRIESTS

This status is explored variously in the New Testament, revealing that God's calling to Israel as his chosen and priestly people is extended to an international community, the church, through faith in Jesus, the Messiah.

As **Revelation 5:9-10** states:

*"[Jesus] You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
because you were slain,  
and with your blood you purchased for God  
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.  
<sup>10</sup> You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
and they will reign<sup>[b]</sup> on the earth."*

As part of that people beyond count, drawn from the nations into Israel's priestly ministry, we now serve the Lord from earth to heaven, and heaven to earth.

- When we pray, as priests we enter into the Most Holy place and boldly approach the throne of grace for our own needs, the needs of each other, and on behalf of the world.
- When we worship, participating in Christ's primary worship to the Father, as High Priest, again as priests we find ourselves presenting our praise again into Heaven:

#### Hebrews 12 states:

*<sup>18</sup> You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; <sup>19</sup> to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, <sup>20</sup> because they could not bear what was commanded... <sup>21</sup> The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."<sup>[a]</sup>*

*<sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, <sup>23</sup> to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

- As priests we also present living sacrifices before the Father: our bodies. We lay down our lives, honouring Him, not to work for God's favour, or to provoke his renewed pleasure for us because we have it completely. Rather, from the position of being loved entirely, we offer our lives and worship out of genuine gratitude and thankfulness.

#### Q: Is this encouraging? Have we ever viewed worship as the means to make God love us more?

- From this position in the most holy place in heaven, the church then represents God back to the world, so that the world encounters the Lord through our faithful presence, action, and speech. We become the outpost of heaven on earth, as the Temple of God through the Holy Spirit in us.

The effect of our priestly life is seen in the closing chapters of the Bible. In Revelation 21-22, we see God's Kingdom in Heaven come down to Earth, with the establishment of a New Eden.

The vast assembly of the world for whom we also prayed and worshipped the Lord on behalf of, finally undergoes their own priestly entrance toward God's Divine Majesty, and the families of the earth receive the blessing promised to Abraham.

As the Bible story closes, we see God's people and the nations of the world together as priests, who see the LORD's face and serve Him forever in a new creation.

And that's the story of priesthood in the Bible!

#### Q: What closing thoughts or questions do you have of this theme conveyed throughout the Bible?